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Dene Holl-Go!

By the Author of
"CASM LYNN"



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DENE HOLLOW.

A Novel.

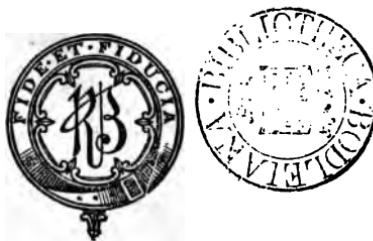
BY

MRS. HENRY WOOD,

AUTHOR OF "EAST LYNNE," "THE CHANNINGS," "ROLAND YORKE,"
&c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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DENE HOLLOW.

PART THE FIRST.

CHAPTER I.

SIR DENE.

A FAIR scene. None fairer throughout this, the fairest of all the Midland counties. Winter had turned. The blue of the sky was unbroken ; the sunshine shed down its bright and cheering warmth ; it was the first day of real spring.

Standing on a somewhat elevated road, as compared with the ground in front, was a group of gentlemen, talking earnestly ; and noting critically the points of the landscape immediately around. They stood with their backs to the iron gates of the lodge ; gates that gave admittance to a winding avenue lead-

ing up to a fine old seat, Beechhurst Dene. Before them—the ground descending slightly, so that they looked down on it and saw all the panorama—were sunny plains, and groves of towering trees, and sparkling rivulets ; a farm-house here and there imparting life to the picture. The little village of Hurst Leet (supposed to be a corruption of Hurst Hamlet) lay across, somewhat towards the right, as they gazed. Beyond it, at two or three miles' distance, was the city of Worcester, its cathedral very conspicuous on this clear day, as well as the tapering spire of the church of St. Andrew. Amidst other features of the beautiful scenery, the eye, sweeping around the distant horizon on all sides, caught the long chain of the Malvern Hills ; the white houses (very few in those days) nestling at their base like glittering sea shells amidst moss. The hills, rising up there, looked very close, not much further off than Worcester. They were more than double the distance—and in a totally opposite direction. Nothing is more deceiving than perspective.

A quick walker, taking the fields and the stiles ; that is, direct as the crow flies ; might walk to the village of Hurst Leet in ten minutes from the lodge gates of Beechhurst

Dene. But if he went by the road—as he must do if he had either horse or vehicle—it would take him very considerably longer, for it was a round-about way, part of it very hilly. He would have to turn to his left (almost as though he were going from the village instead of to it) and sweep round quite three parts of a circle: in short, make very much of what Tony Lumpkin calls a circum-bendibus. The question now occupying these gentlemen, was, whether a straighter and nearer road should not be cut, chiefly for the accommodation of the family residing at Beechhurst Dene.

The chief of the group, and most conspicuous of it, was Beechhurst Dene's owner—Sir Dene Clanwaring. By the Clanwaring family—and consequently by others—it was invariably pronounced Clannering: indeed some of the branches had long spelt it so. Sir Dene was a tall and fine man of fifty years; his features were noble and commanding, his complexion was fresh and healthy. He was of fairly good family, but nothing *very* great or grand, and had won his baronetcy for himself after making his fortune in India. Fortunes were made in those by-gone days, when the East India Company was flourishing, quicker than

they are in these. It was nothing for the soldier, resident there for long years, to unite with his duties the civilian's pursuits, so far as money-making went ; and Dene Clanwaring had been one who did this. He was a brave man, had won fame as well as money, and at a comparatively early age he returned home for good, with a large fortune and a baronetcy. People told fabulous tales of his wealth—as is sure to be the case—augmenting it to a few millions. He himself could have testified that it was about six thousand pounds a-year, all told.

Looking out, on his return from India, for some desirable place to settle down in for life, chance directed Sir Dene Clanwaring to Beechhurst Dene in Worcestershire ; of which county he was originally a native. Whether it was the estate itself that attracted him, or whether it was the accidental fact that it bore his own name, Dene, certain it was that Sir Dene searched no farther. He purchased it at once, entailing it on his eldest son, John Ingram Clanwaring, and his heirs for ever.

Shortly after entering into possession of it, his wife, Lady Clanwaring, died. Sir Dene —standing there in the road before us to-day —is, as may be seen, in deep mourning. It is

worn for her. He was very fond of her and the loss was keenly felt. Close by his side is his second son Geoffry ; a tall, fair, golden-haired, pleasant-looking young fellow, who is in black also. Near to them, bends an old and curious-looking little man, very thin and undersized ; his hard features are pinched, his few gray hairs scanty. It is Squire Arde of the Hall. He wears a suit of pepper-and-salt ; breeches, waistcoat, gaiters and coat ; with silver knee and shoe-buckles, and a white beaver hat. Over his clothes is a drab great coat of some fluffy material, but the Squire has thrown it quite back, and it seems to lodge on the tips of his narrow shoulders. The only other individual, completing the party, is Jonathan Drew, Sir Dene's bailiff ; a hard man also, but a faithful, trustworthy servant. Sir Dene took him over from the previous owner of the estate, Mr. Honeythorn, and had already found his value. Drew managed the land and the tenants well, though complaints were murmured of his severity. He was turned sixty ; a lean may-pole of a man, in a long, fustian coat, and high-crowned brown hat, looking altogether not unlike a scarecrow in a corn-field. The bailiff was uncommonly ugly, and appeared at the present moment

more so than usual from an access of ill-temper: which is plainly perceptible, as he addresses his master.

“‘ Make my duty to Sir Dene, Mr. Drew, please, and tell him that I can’t be turned out o’ my house nohow; I’ve got the paper,’ says she to me. ‘ Then why don’t you perduce the paper, Mrs. Barber?’ says I, bantering at her. ‘Cause I can’t find it, sir; I’ve mislaid it,’ goes on she. ‘ Mislaid what you’ve never had,’ says I, as I flung away from her. And she never did have it, Sir Dene,” wound up Drew; “don’t you believe it, sir. Obstinate old granny!”

“ When she sees that there are other cottages to be had; when she knows that it will be to the advantage of all her neighbours, I must say that I think it is unreasonable of her to refuse to go out,” remarked Sir Dene, his brow contracted, his face severe just then. Accustomed all his life to command, he brooked not opposition to his will.

“ Onreasonable, Sir Dene!” echoed Drew. “ It’s a sight worse nor unreasonable: it’s vicious.”

The new road that Sir Dene purposed making to the village, had been the subject of much planning and consideration between

himself and his agent, Drew. One or two sites had been thought of, but the best attainable—there could be no doubt of it—the most convenient and the shortest, was one that would open nearly immediately opposite his own gates. The line that would have to be cut through was his own property, every field of it, every hedge ; and a foot-way, for a part of the road, seemed to point out its desirability. If they cut this line, it would be at quite a third less cost, both as to money and trouble, than any other. Naturally Sir Dene wished it to be fixed upon ; and Drew, who was red-hot on the new scheme, knowing it must improve the property, would not tolerate any complaints against it.

But there was an obstacle. About a hundred yards down the path just mentioned, stood a cottage of the better class : a dwelling of five rooms, with masses of yellow jessamine climbing up its outer walls. It had once belonged to a small farmer-proprietor of the name of Barber, who came to it in right of his wife. He had died in earlier life (several years ago now,) leaving his widow and two daughters. His affairs were found to be in disorder—that is, he had died in hopeless

debt. The widow and daughters took immediate steps to extricate themselves and uphold their late father's integrity. The cottage, with the bit of land attaching to it, was sold to Mr. Honeythorn, then the owner of Beechhurst Dene, who had been long wishing to possess it. Widow Barber remained in the occupancy of the dwelling and one field, as tenant, paying an easy yearly rent ; and she said that Mr. Honeythorn had given her a paper, or covenant, promising that she should not be turned out while she lived.

To make the road in the track contemplated by Sir Dene, this cottage would have to come down, for the projected line ran right through it. Drew, acting for Sir Dene, served Mrs. Barber with a formal notice to quit. Mrs. Barber met it by a verbal refusal (civilly and tearfully delivered) to go out ; and an assertion to the above effect : namely, that she held the granted right to stay in the cottage for the term of her natural life, and that she possessed a paper in Mr. Honeythorn's own writing to confirm this right. In fact, this paper alone constituted her right, for nothing in relation to it had been found amidst Mr. Honeythorn's effects, though his executors had searched minutely. Jonathan

Drew told Mrs. Barber to her face that there had never been any such paper, save in her imagination ; Mrs. Barber had retaliated, not only that there was such a paper, but that Drew knew of it as well as she did, for that he had known of it at the time it was given. However, Mrs. Barber, search as she would, could not find this paper ; she had either lost or mislaid it, or else had never possessed it. Matters, therefore, stood at this point, and Mrs. Barber retained the notice to quit at Lady-Day—which was fast approaching.

The affair had vexed Sir Dene ; it was at length beginning to enrage him. Fully persuaded—partly by Drew, partly by the fact of absolute non-evidence—that no such right had ever been conceded to the widow Barber, he could not see why the old woman's obstinacy should be let stand in the way of his plans. One dwelling-house was surely as good for her as another ! But he had not quite fully decided on this thing ; he was standing out there now, talking it over with his son and Drew, with a view to arrive at some decision. Squire Arde had come up accidentally.

“ It would be but the work of a month or two,” cried Sir Dene in his enthusiasm, stand-

ing with his arms on the fence, and looking across to the village. "See, Mr. Arde, it seems but a stone's throw."

"And nothing in the way of it but that dratted cottage!" put in Jonathan Drew.

Geoffry Clanwaring was sending his good-natured blue eyes roving here and there in the landscape, apparently in thought. Presently he addressed his father.

"Would it not be possible, sir, to carry the cutting a few yards on this side," moving his right hand, "and so leave the cottage standing?"

"No," replied Sir Dene. "The road shall be cut straight, or not at all."

"If you was to make a in-and-out road, like a dog's leg, as good stick to the old un, Mr. Geoffry," spoke up Drew. "Besides, there'd be the stream in the way lower down. No: there ain't no line but this—and Sir Dene 'll hardly let a pig-headed old widow stand in the light of it."

"There's the smoke a sprouting out of her chimney," struck in Squire Arde—who in familiar life was not very particular in his mode of speech, after the fashion of many country gentlemen of the period.

"A biling of her pot for dinner!" cried Drew. "Miserable old cat!"

"I mind me that something was said about that paper at the time," resumed the Squire.

"What paper?" asked Sir Dene, sharply.

"The one given her by Honeythorn."

Sir Dene drew a long breath. He would never have committed an injustice in the teeth of facts.

"Was such a paper given to her?"

"I don't know myself," replied Squire Arde, gazing out at the smoke with his watery eyes. "Some talk on't was abroad. 'Twas said Tom Barber's widow had got such a paper—had got it out of Honeythorn. On t'other hand, it might ha' been all lies. Drew, here, ought to know which way 'twas."

"I've told Sir Dene which way 'twas—that there warn't none," spoke Drew, tilting his hat up on his bald head. "Mr. Honeythorn did nothing o' that kind without me—not likely to. And if he had—put it that way—ought it to be binding on Sir Dene? Why in course not. Old Granny Barber's one o' them cantankerous idiots that thinks nobody's turn is to be served but their own."

"Well, I must be going—or I shall not get there and home again by two o'clock, and

that's my dinner hour," observed the Squire, pulling his light coat forward over his contracted chest. "I've got a goose to pluck with Black, up at the Trailing Indian. He was seen in my woods a night or two ago : and he'll have to tell me the reason why."

Drew threw back his long neck in a kind of mockery. "If you can keep Randy Black out o' your woods, Squire, you'll be cleverer nor other people."

"Well, I'm going up to him to have a try at it," was the old man's answer. "Good day to ye, Sir Dene."

"A moment yet, Squire Arde," said the baronet, detaining him. "Tell me truly what your opinion on this subject is. Should I turn the old woman out, or not?"

But the curious little man seemed to shrink into himself at the question ; to become smaller than ever, if that were possible : as he avoided Sir Dene with a shake of the head.

"No, no, Sir Dene Clanwaring—no good to ask *me*. I've lived long enough to know that to thrust one's finger into one's neighbour's pie brings often nothing but heart-burning in the long run. If I said to you

‘turn her out,’ and you came to repent of it later, why you’d lay the blame on me. ‘Arde advised me’ you’d be muttering to yourself night and morning, and give me anything but a blessing. Take t’other view. If I said to you ‘*don’t* turn her out; make the road elsewhere,’ and you took the advice, you’d be ever hankering after this track that you’d missed. The cottage would become an eyesore; you’d call yourself a fool, and a double fool, to have been guided by old Arde. No, no. You must act upon your own judgment, Sir Dene; not mine. It’s nothing to me. The old roads have done for me my time, and they’ll do to the end. Good day.”

He moved away with brisk steps towards the left, stooping forward, as was his wont. Another minute, and there met him three individuals: a gentleman and two young ladies. At least, if not a gentleman, he entirely looked like one. It was Robert Owen; a farmer who had but recently come to live in the neighbourhood, renting a farm of Sir Dene’s. He was of notable appearance. Sir Dene was a handsome man, but not so handsome as Robert Owen. He would have been of distinguished presence amidst kings. Of noble height, slender and upright, his face,

with its clearly-cut features of the highest type, its pure complexion bright even yet as a woman's, and its very dark blue eyes, presented a picture beautiful to look upon. But what caused him to be more remarkable than aught else, was the fact that he had a soft, silvery white beard, falling over his white top coat: and in those days beards were very uncommon. In years he might have numbered about as many as Sir Dene. His two daughters had inherited his beauty—but not his height. Lovely girls they were, with dimpled, blushing cheeks, and of modest, simple, retiring manners; generally called, both in this neighbourhood and the one they had left, “the pretty Miss Owens.” Mary, the elder of them, had been a wife for some months now: George Arde, a relative of the Squire's, had married her. Maria, the younger, was Miss Owen still.

“How d'ye do, Owen?” cried the Squire, carelessly.

Robert Owen touched his hat as he answered that he was well—and “hoped the squire was.” None could be more sensible than he of the social distance that lay between him and Squire Arde: he was but a humble, working farmer. The young ladies stood blushing;

Mary not venturing to speak, unless the Squire should first notice her. They wore hooded scarlet cloaks, the fashion in those days, and white straw gipsy hats, their beautiful brown hair falling in curls underneath.

“It’s you, is it !” cried he, nodding to Mary.
“How’s George ?”

“He is quite well, thank you, sir,” she replied, with a slight curtsey.

“Over here ?”

“No, sir. He is at home. My father came into Worcester yesterday and brought me back : my mother’s not well. George is coming over for me to-morrow.”

With a slight general nod from the Squire, to which the young ladies curtsied and the farmer again touched his hat, they pursued their respective ways. The footsteps caused Sir Dene and his party to turn their heads, which were still bent over the fence. Jonathan Drew vouchsafed an ungracious nod to the farmer ; Sir Dene a more pleasant one ; but Geoffry Clanwaring went up, spoke cordially to the farmer in his free, good-natured way, and shook hands with Mrs. Arde and Maria Owen.

It was but a slight episode. They went

on, and Mr. Geoffry Clanwaring returned to the fence again.

But Sir Dene had become tired of standing still ; perhaps a little tired of his indecision. Saying something about business at Hurst Leet, he suddenly turned alone down the narrow path before-mentioned—which would take him straight by the cottage in dispute.

Perhaps few cottages could boast less of a look-out in front. This had none. The door nearly abutted on the path : there was not more than a yard and a half of ground between, but that little space was redolent of sweet-scented gillyflowers—as they are called in Worcestershire. On the other side the path, the bank rose as perpendicularly as though it had been a cutting ; a high bank, whose elm-trees, towering above it, threw the shadow of their branches over the cottage-roof. This fine grove of trees—which began at the top of the path, opposite Sir Dene's gates—was the pride of Sir Dene's heart. He'd not have had any one of the trees cut down for the world. The cottage—as Sir Dene walked—lay on his right hand, the bank and trees on his left. The door was standing open as he passed, and he caught a vision of a plump old woman inside it in grey

stockings, who was stooping to skim a pan of cream in the passage.

“Old Mother Barber,” said Sir Dene to himself.

“Old Mother Barber,” hearing the footsteps, looked up. When she saw whose they were, a tremor, as if an ice-shaft had darted through her heart, took her, and she ran into her kitchen like a frightened hare. She wore a short black gown of rough flannel cloth, its sleeves cut off at the elbow, a cotton print handkerchief crossed upon her shoulders, the ends, back and front, confined under her check apron, and a mob-cap tied round with black ribbon, the bow in front. What little hair could be seen, was grey. A cleanly-looking, but timorous old woman, five or six years past seventy. To be turned out of the cottage, in which she was born, and had lived all her life; seemed to her the very worst evil that could by possibility fall on her in this world. The old cling to their resting-places ; and it is in the nature of age to exaggerate discomforts and misfortunes.

The kitchen window at the back looked out upon a fair scene : it was just as pleasant as the front was dull : sunny plains near, Worcester in the distance Also—morning after

morning, as that old woman awoke, her eyes had fallen on the familiar Malvern hills (for she could catch a glimpse of them slantwise from her own front chamber), on the white dots of houses underneath, glistening in the early sun, and on the sloping vale of wood and dale descending in one great expanse.

“Lord, be good to me!” she murmured, her hands crossed upon her bosom, that was beating so fast underneath the cotton handkerchief. “Let not my poor homestead be ‘reft from me while I live!”

Her glance fell on her cherished out-door belongings: on the one pig in the sty; on the cow in the meadow, by whose produce, the milk, she was helped to exist; on the patch of cabbage and potato ground. The brook, winding along nearly close to her back door (and which brook, perhaps, caused Sir Dene’s difficulty in regard to taking the road a few yards further off, as his son had suggested, for the water, widening into a stream lower down to feed the mill, might not be interfered with) was dancing in the sun, its gentle murmurings falling lightly on the ear. Time had been, when that murmuring soothed her to peace; latterly, since this horrible fear had oppressed her, it seemed to suggest nothing

but woe. Suddenly, another sound drowned it—a sharp knock, as with a stick, at the front door. Looking out of her kitchen, she saw Sir Dene.

And whether she stood on her head or her heels, the poor woman could not have told had she lived to be a hundred. The sight scared her senses away. At the most favourable of times, and when she was a younger woman, she would have been struck into incapability at the presence of a great man like Sir Dene Clanwaring : regarding him now as a powerful enemy, it increased the feeling ten-fold. Saying he had stepped back to speak to her, he walked, of his own accord, into the open small front room, or parlour, which had a sanded floor, and a bright-painted tea-tray lodged against the side wall for ornament. She followed him in, curtseying and shaking visibly. Without any circumlocution, Sir Dene inquired whether she was in possession of the paper that she professed to be.

What with the abrupt question and its nature, what with her own startled fears and her innate timidity, Mrs. Barber behaved like a lunatic. She could get out no answer at all. When it did come, it was strangely hesitating, and given in a whisper.

She "believed" she had got such a paper somewhere—and she hoped "his honour" would not be hard upon her.

Sir Dene Clanwaring curled his lip. An honourable man himself, he regarded deception as the worst fault on earth. This old woman before him was shaking from head to foot; her speech and manner were alike uncertain, and he believed she was telling him a falsehood. From that moment he regarded the plea she had put forth, not as a mistake on her part, but a pure invention.

"Look here, Mrs. Barber," he said sternly. "The road I purpose making will be of great benefit to myself and the public: it ought not to be stopped by any private interests. If you have the paper you speak of, bring it to me, and I will consider it—though I do not promise, and do not at present intend, mind, to be swayed by it. This is Tuesday: if, on Friday, I have not the paper before me, I shall give orders for the work to go on. Lady-Day will fall about a week afterwards; and I must request that you will be out of this on, or before, that day when it shall come. Good morning, ma'am."

She closed the door after him with trem-

bling hands, when he had got to a proper distance. And then she sat down on the nearest seat—which happened to be a milk-pail turned bottom upwards—and wiped her face with her apron.

Sir Dene went on down the path. In a short while it widened considerably, and branched off into the open fields. Had the cottage stood as low down as this, there would have been no absolute necessity to raze it. But—it stood where it did stand; nothing more could be made of it than that. Bearing to the right, after stepping over the little bridge, and passing his bailiff's house, which was nearly hidden amidst some trees, Sir Dene crossed a stile at the end of the field, and the village was before him, the church lying rather far beyond it. As he went by the village stocks (used often then), the village doctor, James Priar—a little man in spectacles, who looked ten years older than his real age, which was but thirty—crossed his path.

“Have you decided about the new road, Sir Dene?” the doctor asked, when they had talked for a minute or two.

“Yes; in a week's time from this you will

see it begun," was the baronet's firm answer, as he pursued his way.

Just a minute we must take, to follow Drew, before closing the chapter. Not for any particular purpose as regards *him*, but to afford the reader a little more insight into the locality.

Mr. Jonathan Drew, then, when his master quitted him, and Geoffry Clanwaring had disappeared within his father's gates, betook himself about his business. He pursued the road to the right—in the opposite direction to that taken by Squire Arde—and soon came to some farm-houses and cottages. Some half-mile, or more, from the gates of Beechhurst Dene, there stood back, on the left, a substantial stone house, its front facing Hurst Leet ; with good gardens and farm-buildings around it. This was Arde Hall. The road here was open, and the village underneath the Hall (underneath, so to say, for the ground still sloped a little) could be more plainly seen. *Here* would have been the best spot to make the new road—if one must have been made at all : but Squire Arde, to whom the ground belonged, would as soon have thought of making a bull-run. Jonathan Drew came to a standstill, as if tracing

it out—for the road was what his thoughts were running upon.

“Ay, this ‘ud ha’ been the right track to hollow it through,” ran his reflections. “Catch old Arde at it! When Sir Dene does it, though, Arde won’t be back’ard to reap the benefit. A down-right good move, it’ll be for Sir Dene’s property. My old bones ’ll be spared a bit, too, when I can ride straight up, ’stead ’o going round, or trapesing it afoot. The Squire gets more niggardly as he gets older. Wouder who’ll come in for his savings—and his estate? Shouldn’t wonder but he’ll leave all to a mad-house! I’d lay a crown on’t. As to that cross-grained old stupe, Granny Barber, who’s she, that she should put in her spoke again the public good? One place is just as good as another, for the short time she’ll want a place at all. One foot must be in the grave now, and t’other’s hardly out on’t.”

With this, Mr. Drew brought his comments to a conclusion. There was a pathway down to the village from hence, just as there was nearer Beechhurst Dene; and he appeared undecided whether or not to take it. But finally he continued his way on the road.

We need not follow him : the highway took a sudden turn just above here, and branched off, between rich pasture lands and home-steads large and small, far away from Hurst Leet.

CHAPTER II.

HAREBELL FARM.

IN turning to the left, on emerging from the gates of Beechhurst Dene, the road continued to run in a tolerably straight line for about the third of a mile. It then branched off, almost at right angles, in two directions: that to the right being the continuance of the road; that to the left soon becoming nothing but a solitary lane. We may have occasion to follow the road later, so just now we will take the lane.

As dismal and shadowy a place at night, this Harebell Lane, as you would care to enter. On the right, lying back, stood a very moderate-sized dwelling, with its fold-yard, ricks, and barns. This was Harebell Farm; in the occupancy of Robert Owen.

Not far on, on the left, were two wooden gates side by side ; one for carts, one for people on foot—they were the back, or side, entrance to Beechhurst Dene. The lane wound on, getting narrower and darker. Its banks were tolerably high, its over-hanging trees shut out the daylight. But soon it widened considerably : in one part forming on the right-hand a capacious curve, in which lay a rather deep pool, green with slime within and rushes without ; and known as “ Harebell Pond.” A plantation of firs was fenced in on the bank rising immediately above it. Altogether, in spite of its space, this was the most dreary part of the lane. A few yards onwards, the lane, narrowing again, took a sharp turn to the right, and led direct to an inn of not too good reputation, called “ The Trailing Indian.” The man, keeping this inn, was named Randolph Black. His brother, Moses Black, had died about a twelvemonth ago at Harebell Farm. They had come strangers to the place some years back, evidently monied men ; at any rate, flush of ready money ; and became tenants of Mr. Honeythorn. Moses took Harebell Farm ; Randolph the solitary public-house, known then as “ The Plough ;” but which he re-named “ The

Trailing Indian." After a few years, Moses Black died. Randolph immediately applied to Sir Dene Clanwaring (who had just become his landlord through the purchase of Beechhurst Dene) to be allowed to take the farm as well as the inn ; evincing unmistakable eagerness that it should be so. His character, however, had developed itself by this time ; and Sir Dene, instructed on the point, refused. Robert Owen then presented himself to Sir Dene as a tenant for the farm ; and to him it was leased. A little beyond the Trailing Indian, Harebell Lane was crossed by a high road ; in fact, was terminated by it : and it was to the chance of the travellers on this high way turning aside to the inn, that the Trailing Indian trusted—or assumed to trust—for its support.

But we must go back to Harebell Farm. Entering at the small wooden gate (that, and the large one by its side, looked like twin brothers of those of Beechhurst Dene on the other side of the lane) and passing round by the barns, the ricks, and the fold-yard, we come to the front ; for the dwelling faced the opposite way. The house was full of angles ; the red-brick of which it was built had become dark and dingy with age. A square

patch of lawn and flower-garden was before the door ; beyond it stretched out the expanse of meadow and corn-fields ; with the tips of the Malvern hills bounding the horizon in the distance.

It was a day or two after the one mentioned in the last chapter ; and the sky was as blue as then, and the sunshine as bright. In a homely room, partaking somewhat of the kitchen as well as of the parlour, save that cooking was not done in it, sat Mrs. Owen after dinner ; a delicate-looking woman of low voice and gentle manners. She had on a warm gown of purple stuff, a large collar of muslin-work—the mode then—and white lace cap. Her feet rested on a footstool ; her thin hands were busy with a heap of stockings, sorting those that wanted darning from those that did not. At the window, preparing to embroider a strip of fine cambric that was to form a portion of an infant's cap, sat Maria Owen—prettier without her bonnet even than with it. She wore a dress of light, checked green silk, its sleeves finished with a ruffle and a fall of lace just below the elbow. Her hair fell in glossy curls, her fresh, bright, dimpled face was something good to look upon. The floor was of red brick—squares—

but a carpet covered it to the edge of the chairs : the furniture, plain, old, but of substantial mahogany, was polished to brightness. This was the parlour in ordinary use ; there was a handsomer one, called the best parlour, for high-days and holidays. The terms dining-room and drawing-room were too grand for a farm-house in those unpretentious days.

Maria looked up to speak : some eagerness on her beautiful face. "Mamma, how long do you think I shall be, working this cap ?"

"That depends, my dear, upon the time you are able to give to it," was Mrs. Owen's answer. "You cannot neglect your necessary home occupations for fancy-work."

"Oh I know that. I won't neglect anything. I should like to get it done in two months."

"You have chosen so very intricate a pattern, Maria."

"But it will be all the more beautiful. I should not like Polly to be buying a best cap. Rather than that, I would tell her I am working this one : though I want it to be a surprise. I think you can give me some old lace for it, mamma."

"I shall see, when the cap's finished—whether it is worth it."

Standing by the fire, having come in during this colloquy, was a rather tall and somewhat hard-featured woman, with a strange look of perplexity on her sensible face. She wore the costume of the day, a print gown straight down to the ankles, white stockings, and tied shoes. This was Mary Barber: the faithful upper servant of the house—indeed, there was but one maid kept besides—but regarded more as a friend than a servant. Her features were well-formed; her hair, worn in small curls on either side of her face beneath the cap-border, was of a bright-brown yet. What Mary Barber's age was, could not be guessed from her appearance. At thirty years of age she had looked middle-aged; she looked it still; she would probably look it for thirty years to come. Perhaps she was now not very much turned forty. Her mother was the old woman you saw skimming the milk.

"Have you done that bit of ironing, Mary?" asked Mrs. Owen.

"No, missis."

A shade of surprise passed over Mrs. Owen's features. But she said nothing.

"I can't settle to anything, missis; and

that's the plain truth," burst forth the woman, flinging up her hands. "It is a cruel, wicked thing, that my poor old mother should come to this when she's close upon her grave."

"It is very grievous to be turned out of one's home," remarked Mrs. Owen, a sad, far-off look in her lifted eyes.

"It's worse to have her word disputed : at least *I* think it so. Jonathan Drew told me to my face last night, missis, that mother must be in her dotage, to fancy she had ever had the paper."

"But you told me Mr. Drew knew of her having the paper."

"Mother says he knew of it; she always said he did. I wish Sir Dene Clanwaring had stayed where he was, afore he'd ever come here to trouble us."

"When once your mother's out of the place—if she has to go out—I daresay she won't mind it, Mary Barber," observed the young lady. "One home is as good as another."

"Much you know about it, Miss Maria ! If you had to be turned out of your home, you'd tell a different tale."

"Why I have been turned out of it. We all have. That is, my father chose to leave.

I can tell you, Mary Barber, I was sad enough at the time: but I like this one best now."

Mary Barber gave a rather significant sniff, as if she thought there might be some special cause for the young lady's liking the new one best.

"You don't understand it, Miss Maria. The young can't be expected to know how much old people become attached to their homes, so that they seem like just a part of themselves and that it gets as hard to part with 'em as it is to part with a limb. I am sure of this," concluded Mary Barber emphatically—"that if mother is drove out, she'll go straight to the grave-yard."

Maria dropped her cambric in consternation. "Do you mean that it would—kill her?" she asked in a low tone.

"Just as certainly, Miss Maria, as that the Lord's looking down upon us to note the injustice. And He *will* note it—if it's done."

"Hush, Mary," interposed her mistress. "Let us hope for the best. She may be let stay in it yet."

"Well, I'll hope it, missis, as long as I can: and I'll do my best to further it. But it won't be none the nearer coming to pass, for

all that : I've not had these bad dreams lately for nothing. And poor mother, always in distress, is first and foremost in every one of 'em."

There was a short silence : the cuckoo clock against the wall ticking out lazily the minutes of the afternoon. Mary Barber resumed—

" If it warn't for that bit of ironing, missis—and I know it ought to be done when to-morrow's Friday and cleaning-day—I'd ask you to spare me."

" What for ?" questioned Mrs. Owen.

" To go to Sir Dene Clanwaring," said the woman in a decisive tone, and both her auditors looked up in amazement. " When I was at mother's last night I told her to have one good last hunt for the paper, and to send it me this morning if she could find it. It hasn't come ; which is a pretty safe sign that it's not found. But perhaps if we both go together to Sir Dene, she and me, and I speak up quietly for her to him—for she'd never have the courage to speak for herself—he may listen to us, and let her stay. The ironing——"

" I'll do the ironing for you, Mary," cried Miss Owen, starting up with sweet good nature. " I'll go and set about it now."

Mary Barber made ready for her errand ; and came down stairs dressed in her best, surprising her mistress. A cinnamon-brown gown of soft cashmere, and grey twilled-silk shawl with its handsome border of bright colours. She had had the shawl for half her life, and it looked as good as new now. The straw bonnet, of the "cottage" shape, had gay ribbons on it.

" You have dressed yourself up, Mary ! "

" Yes, missis. If I had gone in my rags, Sir Dene mightn't have looked twice at me. Dress goes down with all the world. You'll wish me luck, ma'am."

But the word, rags, was merely a figure of speech. Mary Barber was always tidy to a degree. And as she turned out at the back door, a folded handkerchief and her large cotton umbrella in her hand—an invariable appendage when she had on her best things, no matter how fine the weather—an old slipper and a joyous laugh came after her from Miss Maria.

She went along at a brisk pace, drawing on her gloves. In the fold-yard she met the farmer. He regarded the dressed-up apparition with intense astonishment.

" Why, ^hwere are you off to, Mary, woman ?"

She told him where. Mr. Owen shook his head a little, as if he had not much faith in the result of the expedition.

" You can try of course, Mary Barber. But great men, like Sir Dene, don't choose to be dictated to, or thwarted in any scheme they set their minds on."

" Sir Dene went as far as to say to mother that he'd deliberate upon it if the paper could be found, master," she observed, noting the signs.

" But the paper's not found. My opinion is, it would have been better never to have said anything about the paper, as it's not forthcoming."

" Why!—surely, master, you are not supposing that there never was any such paper?" she exclaimed.

" I feel as sure as you do that the paper was given," he answered. " I heard speak of it at the time. But Sir Dene is a stranger among us; and, to assert such a thing to him, and in the same breath to plead inability to produce the paper, gives a bad impression, you see."

Mr. Owen was in his usual working attire—for he took a very active part amidst his

men : drab breeches and gaiters, and a drab coat. In his younger days, Robert Owen was fond of pleasure ; had been what would now be called fast, seduced to it perhaps by his remarkable beauty. He would neglect his business to follow the hounds, to take a morning's shooting, to kill time and spend money in many other ways. Debts had accumulated, and he had been ever since a crippled man in means. Instead of remaining a gentleman farmer, he had been obliged to degenerate into a working one, always pulled back by want of capital. None could regret that early improvidence more than he : but unfortunately regrets don't undo these things. He had taken this new farm, hoping to do better at it than he had at the old one, the lease of which was out. Mrs. Owen had been quite willing to leave the old home. They had lost their youngest son in it, Thomas, a very promising youth, under distressing circumstances ; and while she stayed in it she could not forget her sorrow.

“ Mary Barber will not succeed,” was Mr. Owen’s mental thought as he stroked his fine white beard in abstraction, and his eyes followed her through the gate to the lane. “ The old woman has no doubt inadvertently

destroyed that paper : and without it, she has no legal case."

" Well, mother, is it found ?" began Mary Barber, entering her mother's home and kitchen without ceremony.

Mrs. Barber was bending over the fire, on which stood a large saucepan full of potato peelings that she was boiling for her fowls. She turned her head.

" Lawk a day !" was her exclamation as the vision of her smart daughter burst on her astonished view. " Whatever be you decked out for, like that, Mary ? 'T aint the wake."

" No ; but missis has gave me holiday," replied Mary, sitting down on the wooden chair, which she dusted first with a cloth. " Have you found the paper, mother ?"

Poor Mrs. Barber shook her head. " I've looked for it till I can look no longer ; above stairs and below. I looked till I went to bed, Mary ; where I got no sleep all night ; and at daylight I was up, looking again. It'll wear me out, child ; it'll wear me out."

Lifting the saucepan on the hob, lest its contents should burn whilst she ceased stirring, she dropped on a low wooden stool, and hid

her face in her hands. Mary Barber was looking more cross than compassionate.

“To leave the place where I’ve lived all my life! To see my bits o’ furniture turned out, sold perhaps—for where am I to put ‘em?—these very pots and pans, even” (ranging her eyes on the hanging tins) “that I’ve kept as bright as silver! My poor cow; my fowls; the pig in its sty—Mary, I’d rather the gentlefolks would kill me outright.”

“Now look here, mother,” said Mary—who never wasted the slightest time or sympathy upon sentiment. “That paper is in the house, or ought to be: and if it is, it must be found. First of all—where did you put it?”

“Where did I put it?” repeated Mrs. Barber, rather listlessly, for just at the moment her thoughts were running on abstract matters. “When I was looking in the press this morning—and *that’ll* have to go along o’ the other things, Mary! Oh, woe’s me!”

“Just carry your mind back, mother”—with a slight stamp of the umbrella—“to that back time when it was given you. Who brought it here?”

“Who brought it here?—why, Squire

Honeythorn himself. He came in and sat down in this kitchen in that very chair of your poor father's. I remember being vexed because I'd not got on my best black with the crape bottom to it ; a bombazine it was, three shillings a yard. A grand dressmaker at Worcester made it, and——”

“About Mr. Honeythorn, mother,” interrupted Mary Barber, bringing her up.

“Well, he came in—I can see his pigtail now, hanging over the back o' the chair. The money for the house and land was paid over to Lawyer Haynes, he said, and he had brought to me himself the promise in his own hand that I should not be turned from the place while I lived. A great rogue that Haynes was ! He buttered his own pocket smartly while he settled with your poor father's creditors.”

“Mother, there's the afternoon slipping on. Where did you put the paper then ?”

“In my best tea-caddy,” said the old woman, promptly. “All my papers of consequence be kept in there ; and nobody has never had the key of it but me. That same day, after I'd locked it up, Jonathan Drew looked in to say the money was paid—not knowing his master had been here before

him. I told him of the promise I had got, and he said it was no news to him. Squire Honeythorn had told him he should give it."

"Have you seen the paper since then?"

"Yes, many a time. I've looked at it when I've unlocked the caddy for other papers."

"Will you let *me* look, mother? May-be, it's there still."

Mrs. Barber was a little offended at this, asking her daughter if she thought she had no eyesight; but finally consented. The tea-caddy, a japanned one, had stood on the parlour mantel-piece, its middle ornament, as long as Mary could remember. Mary's keen grey eyes searched every paper—chiefly consisting of the half-yearly receipts for her rent—but the missing paper was not there.

"You must have put it somewhere else yourself, mother."

"I suppose I must. There was a great talk one winter of the highwaymen being about, and I know I got in a worrit over my caddy o' papers, and hid 'em away in places. But I always thought I put 'em all back again later."

"Well, there seems nothing for it but to beg grace of Sir Dene Clanwaring, as we've got no proof to show of any right. And

that's where I am going, mother, and what I've made myself smart for. You must come with me."

But the astounding proposition put Mrs. Barber into a tremor—go to Sir Dene Clancwaring!—and Mary found it was of no use urging it. So she departed alone. In the narrow pathway, almost close to the cottage, stood Jonathan Drew and a couple of men; the latter with a measuring chain in their hands. Mrs. Barber saw them from her door, and turned as white as death.

"What be you a doing?" demanded Mary Barber, as she was passing them.

"Only a measuring out o' the ground, a bit," said Jonathan Drew.

"For the new hollow they talk of?"

"There's not nothing else we should be a measuring of it for," was his retort. And Mary Barber walked on.

Crossing the high road, she entered the gates, and proceeded up the avenue between the fine old trees. Beechhurst Dene was an ancient red-brick mansion, roomy, old-fashioned, comfortable, and withal handsome both outside and in. It stood in the midst of its park, ornamental gardens immediately around it. Mary Barber had been there more

than once in Mr. Honeythorn's time, and knew it well. Avoiding the grand front entrance, she bore round to her right, to the familiar one used by the servants, tenants, and in fact often by the family themselves. Just on this side, the look-out of the house seemed confined, so many trees and shrubs were crowded about. A pathway led direct to the gate in Harebell Lane: and Mary Barber would have made that her way of entrance at first, but for having to go to her mother's. A parlour, with a bay window opening to the ground, faced this way, and Mary saw Sir Dene sitting in it. Knocking at the open side door with her umbrella, she asked a footman if she could be allowed to see his master. The servant did not happen to know her. He told Sir Dene a lady was asking to see him: "leastways a respectable-looking woman, that might be a farmer's wife."

Sir Dene admitted her. But when she introduced herself as Mary Barber, and he found she was the widow Barber's daughter, come to bother him about the new cutting, he felt anything but pleased. Something had occurred that afternoon to vex Sir Dene: it had nothing to do with the matter in ques-

tion ; but it served to put him out of temper. However, he was civil enough to ask her to sit down, and did not refuse to hear her. It was a small room, the floor covered with matting : Sir Dene chiefly received his tenants here, and other business people.

Mary Barber sat bolt upright on the extreme edge of the chair ; her folded handkerchief and umbrella in her hand, her back to the window. Sir Dene was on the other side the table, near the fire, his open desk before him. He listened to what she had to say, without once interrupting her.

“ Do you think this paper, that you talk of, ever had any existence ? ” he asked then—and his tone bore a kind of suppressed scorn, which caused Mary Barber’s hard cheeks to flush.

“ I am sure it had, sir.”

“ Did you ever see it, Mrs. Barber ? ”

“ No, sir ; never,” was the straightforward answer. “ My mother did not show it to me. And I never heard that my sister saw it, either,” she added, in her honesty. “ Neither of us was at home then. Father’s affairs took a good while to arrange after his death ; and before they were settled, my sister Hester and I had gone out to relieve mother of our

keep, and make our own way in the world. I went to service ; Hester married."

" Does she—your sister—profess to remember anything of this promise ?"

" She has been dead some years, sir."

" Don't you think it a strange thing that your mother should not have kept more carefully a paper of the importance she appears to attach to this ?"

" My opinion is, sir, she has kept it too carefully, and put it into some out-of-the-way place for safety, that she can't now remember," was Mary Barber's independent answer.

" There's no doubt she was scared with fear because of the highwaymen : and the best of us are liable to forgetfulness, especially when we grow old."

" I cannot say more than I have done," cried Sir Dene, impatiently. " Produce the paper, and its merits shall be examined. I am in ignorance as to what weight it carried, or was intended to carry. Of course, if it conferred the right *legally* that you seem to fancy—which I think almost an impossibility—we must submit it to a lawyer, and take his opinion : but I strongly suspect it was not legally worth the paper it was written upon."

“Mr. Honeythorn would not trifle with my mother, sir.”

“As to Mr. Honeythorn, I don’t doubt that his bare word, passed, would have been good for him to act upon to the end of his life, without need of document to confirm it. But, what bound him could never be meant to bind me. No, ma’am, nor be expected to, in any sort of reason.”

The manners in those past days were far more courtly than they are now. Sir Dene Clanwaring thought nothing of addressing Mary Barber as “ma’am,” and did not do it ironically.

“I’m afraid you’ll go on with this dreadful thing, sir,” she said, her grey eyes fixed upon him.

“Dreadful thing! It will be a very good thing.”

“Not for my mother. She has been a good woman, sir; her cup of sorrow brim-full.”

“I should say she must be an obstinate one, Mrs. Barber. She would be as well in another cottage as this—and there are plenty to be had for the seeking.”

“She cannot live long, sir,” pleaded Mary Barber. “She——”

"As to that, she may live as long as I," was the interruption. "She is a tough, healthy, hearty woman, and may last for ten or fifteen, ay, for twenty years to come."

"She is in her seventy-sixth year, Sir Dene. Oh, sir, spare her! Don't turn her out to die. I'd make bold to ask, sir, how you would like to be turned out of a home where you'd lived all your days, when you shall be as old as she is. She was born in it; it was her father's before her; and she brought up her children in it, Hester and me. Sir, I know you are one of the high gentlefolks of the land, and it's not becoming of me to dare to speak to you in this free way. Heaven knows, I'd only do it for poor mother's sake."

"I thought the property belonged to your father," observed Sir Dene, on whom the pleading cry appeared to make no impression.

"No, sir; to my mother: she was Hester Drew. When she married Thomas Barber, he went home to her house—which was reversing the order of things in ordinary. Father had nothing of his own: and he was somehow a bad manager: not fortunate. When he died, and it was found affairs were

bad, there seemed nothing for it but selling the property, so that folks should be paid—and my sister and I turned out at once. Squire Honeythorn was sorry for mother, and he gave her the promise we tell of."

"Is your mother any relation to Drew, my bailiff?" asked Sir Dene, noting the coincidence of the name.

"His father and mother's father were second or third cousins, sir—nothing to speak of."

"Has your mother any income of her own?"

"Not a penny, sir. She sacrificed all she had to pay father's debts. The sale of her milk and poultry meets her rent, perhaps a bit over; and she has 'tatoes and other garden stuff; and her pig—which makes bacon to last her the year. And for the rest, I help her to a bit o' tea and that, and Hester's family to other trifles. We shall never let her starve, sir, whatever betides."

"At her age she ought to be glad at the prospect of being relieved from the care of a cow and pig," remarked Sir Dene.

"It is her great pleasure to be active, sir: the back is generally fitted to the burden. Mother is hale and hearty yet."

"She *is*," pointedly acquiesced Sir Dene.
"I have just said so, Mrs. Barber."

He looked at his watch. Mary Barber took the hint, and rose. Sir Dene politely opened the door for her.

She stood still, and curtsied to him. And then—as she was actually passing out—turned round, and clasped her glove hands in a beseeching attitude, holding the great umbrella by one little finger.

"Oh, sir, I hope you'll please to think kindly of it ! I could hardly pray harder to God—as He hears and knows—than I'm praying for this boon to you. She has no one living to take her part but me, or to speak a word for her. Be merciful to her, sir, in this her old age, and let her be ! She may not stand in your way long. God will be sure to reward you for it, Sir Dene ! and she will pray for blessings on you every night and morning of the few poor years of her remaining life."

Hard, matter-of-fact Mary Barber had never spoken such words in her days ; never perhaps been so near to be moved by emotion. After they came forth she stood a moment looking at him, expecting perhaps some hopeful answer. But none came. Sir

Dene Clanwaring steeled alike his ear and his heart.

"I am sorry this should have occurred, Mrs. Barber. In entering upon a fresh estate, one has to look I suppose for disputes and vexations. If I gave in to this exaction, others would no doubt arise: therefore, I must make a stand in my own defence. Good afternoon, ma'am."

Mary Barber, feeling that she had bitterly failed, went straight back to her mother's cottage. There, her bonnet and shawl taken off, her gown-skirt and sleeves turned up, and the biggest apron tied round her that the place afforded, she instituted a thorough search for the missing paper. And found it not.

But Sir Dene Clanwaring, even while he gave her the last decisive answer, said to himself in his heart of hearts that he would sleep upon it. As he did.

And a very heavy sleep it was. For he dropped off the instant he got into bed, and was woken up in the morning by his hot water. During the process of shaving, he decided that Mrs. Barber, née Drew, was what his bailiff, her distant relative, was fond of calling her—an obstinate, cantankerous,

troublesome old woman, who must not be allowed to stand in the light of himself and her neighbours.

And that the road should be made.

CHAPTER III.

MARIA OWEN.

IT was a wild night. Clouds chased each other across the sky, darkening the face of the moon ; the wind dashed along in fitful gusts with a rush and a whirl, dying away in wailing moans.

Stealing up Harebell Lane with steps that seemed to fear their own echo, went two men, carrying between them a bulky parcel, to all appearance remarkably heavy for its size. They had smock frocks thrown over their ordinary attire, and hats slouched low on their faces. A casual passer-by would have taken them for labourers, tramping home with tired feet after a day's ploughing : a keener observer, if accustomed to live amidst rustics, might have seen how uneasily those smock frocks sat, and divined by instinct that they were assumed for a purpose.

“Bear your own weight o’ the load, Geach, and be hanged to ye,” growled one, who was short and compact, to his taller companion.

“And don’t I bear it?—You be shot!” carelessly retorted the other, whose accent was somewhat superior.

The parcel was more like a bundle, its outside covering of dirty canvas, and might have been supposed to contain garments, rather untidily rolled up together. In the stout cord by which it was confined were left two loops at either end, by which the men carried it.

“Change hands.”

They had gone a few paces further when Geach said this, and were close to the gates leading into Beechhurst Dene. Voices and steps, as if advancing from the Dene, at this moment became audible; and the men, who were in the act of changing hands started. A moment’s pause to listen: then Geach pushed his comrade into the ditch under the hedge, without the smallest compunction, and the bundle upon him.

“Keep dark, for your life, Robson!” he breathed. “Hide it, man; hide it. Hang that moon!”

The offending moon, left bright by a departing cloud, was not apostrophised by any so innocent a word as “hang :” but the language really used by these men could not be allowed to appear in polite literature. Possibly believing he was too tall for any hedge or ditch to conceal him, Geach noiselessly leaped to the other side of the lane, and then went on with a bent, sauntering gait, whistling a rustic song. Two people emerged from the grounds of Beechhurst Dene.

“ Good night t’ye, masters,” he said, in the Worcestershire tone.

“ Good night, my man,” heartily responded Geoffry Clanwaring, who made one ; the other being Simmons, his father’s young game-keeper. And they passed down the lane out of sight and hearing.

With some grumbling and grunting, the man called Robson got out of the ditch : which, fortunately for him, was tolerably dry. Taking the parcel between them as before, they stole on, Robson growling still.

“ Tell ye what it is, Geach,” he muttered. “ This here lane ain’t the place it used to be. What with these here new folks at the Dene and their crowd o’ servants, and that dratted

farmer in Mosy Black's farm, I'll be smothered if I call it safe."

"Where's the danger?" airily responded Geach.

"The danger! Take to-night. If them two had pounced upon us afore we'd time to get it away, they might ha' turned curious eyes on it. One was Sir Dene's son; t'other was the keeper. I know'd 'em by their voices."

"Well? They'd have seen a bundle of—anything—done up with apparent looseness, and two poor tired labourers, tramping home to their night's rest. What of that? Before there can be any danger, there must be suspicion, Robson: and I'll take my oath there's none of that abroad yet. You were always a croaker."

"I don't care; I'm right," grumbled Robson. "The way here is not the lone way it was; and danger may come."

"Better hold your tongue just now. There may be ears behind that hedge of Owen's."

It was good advice, and they went on in silence. By the pond, Geach again demanded to change' hands. He was a very tall, upright, and apparently strong young man; yet

his arms seemed to get tired quickly. Robson remarked upon it.

"I had a bad fall a week ago, and my bones haven't done aching yet," explained Geach in a whisper.

What with the natural gloominess of the lane, and the densely black cloud covering the moon, it had been for some minutes safely dark. There occurred a sudden change to light as they were changing hands: the moon shone out in all her best brightness, causing the open part, where they now stood, to be almost as light as day. Robson, his mind not altogether at ease and his eyes roving everywhere, suddenly saw some object leaning over the fence above the pond. Was it a man? Starting back a step involuntarily, he hissed forth a low signal of caution. Geach was always prepared. He pushed the bundle entirely into the arms of his companion—who slightly staggered under the unexpected weight—and began whistling again, as they walked on like two unconcerned rustics.

Yes, it was a man. And one they recognised. There shone the seal-skin cap, tipped with white fur, and the whiter beard of Robert Owen. He was evidently looking at them; watching them openly. They would

have gone on, pretending not to see him, but that a rather sharp cough took Mr. Owen at the same moment; and they could not assume not to hear. Geach stopped his whistling, and turned to speak.

“If ye please, master, can ye tell us whether we be in the right road for Bransford?”

“For Bransford? Why that’s a long way off,” returned Mr. Owen. “You’ll have to wind about a bit, my men, and traverse some cross-country before you get to Bransford. Where d’ye come from?”

“Worcester last.”

“Worcester! Then why did you not take the Bransford road direct—if it’s Bransford you want?”

“Missed our way. Thank ye, master.”

Resuming his whistling, and giving a pull to his hat by way of salutation, Geach walked on. Robson had not stopped.

Mr. Owen stretched himself over the fence to look after them, until they were hidden by the winding of the lane. Geach knew, almost by intuition, that they were being watched. A very emphatic curse broke from his lips.

“What did I tell ye?” whispered Robson.

"The Trailing Indian's not as safe as it was.
It may have to shift its quarters."

"Shift its quarters be stifled!" retorted Geach. "Black can take care of himself; and of you too."

"Well, it's a new thing to be watched like this in Harebell Lane. I don't stomach it, Geach ; I can tell ye that."

A short while, and they arrived at that solitary hostelrie : a low, two storied old house with gables, and a dangling sign-board : it was on the left hand side of the lane as they walked up. The turnpike road, that ran crossways and terminated the lane, was within view. It has already been said that the Trailing Indian professed to derive its support from chance travellers passing up and down it.

Save for one candle, put to stand in a casement window, the inn presented a dark appearance—which for an inn looked most inhospitable. Entering the yard, letting the parcel fall gently on the ground, Geach gave three distinct knocks on the side door, and then tapped at the window. The candle was removed from the casement, and a man's head came out.

"Who's that, knocking at my window?"

“Me and Robson. Open the door, Randy.” Mr. Black hastened to do so. Amidst his friends—and foes too—his Christian name was familiarly converted into Randy: it came easier to the lips than “Randolf.” He was a tall swarthy man of five or six and thirty, with a sinister look in his dark face. Catching up the bundle in his arms, he led the way through passages to a remote room, closed in with shutters: not the room of general entertainment, one entirely private to himself. The men took off their smock frocks, and the landlord called about him. A little woman, very pretty once, but pale, sad-eyed, and struck into meekness by terror long ago, came forward, in answer to his call. It was Mrs. Black.

“Get supper at once—pork chops and mashed potatoes; and put a good log on the parlour fire,” said Black, imperiously. “Don’t be a month over it, now: and come and knock at the door when supper’s ready.”

Save for an ostler, who slept over the stables, and was on very close terms with his master, no servant was kept. The ostler would give help at odd jobs sometimes, otherwise Mrs. Black had to do all the domestic work. It was not over-burthening in a general way; bona fide travellers at the inn

were few and far between. For all the profit they brought, its master might have starved.

The inn had a bad reputation, though the suspicions cast on it were but of a vague nature. Stout sailors and boatmen occasionally made their way to it from barges coming up the Severn, striking across the country from the river by night ; and it was thought their inflated appearance told of concealed brandy-skins and tobacco. Smuggling was largely pursued in those days, and brought back its profits. It is possible that Mr. Black dealt in other things : that his house had some safe hiding-places in it, where booty, the proceeds of robberies in town and country, might be stowed away in safety until the hue-and-cry after it was over. These men, at any rate, sitting round the table to-night, were neither sailors nor boatmen. A tale was current in the neighbourhood that a traveller had disappeared at this inn in a very mysterious manner. It was a pedlar, tramping the country with rather valuable wares. That he had called in at the Trailing Indian for refreshment one summer evening, there was no doubt, intending afterwards to proceed on his way to Worcester by moonlight. The landlord, and the ostler, and Mrs. Black, all

declared that he had so proceeded : and there was no proof at all that he had not. However it may have been, the pedlar had not turned up at Worcester ; he had never been seen or heard of since.

There was only one candle on the table ; and, that, of tallow ; but the articles Mr. Black was feasting his eyes upon, shone as brightly as though they had been illuminated by lime-light. Massive articles of solid silver, were they ; some few of gold : no wonder, packed compactly, that the two porters had found them somewhat heavy. Geach was a fair, nice-looking young man, his features small, all but the nose ; that was high, shapely, and prominent. He was born to fill a better station, but evil courses had brought him down in the world. Robson had a close and contracted expression of countenance. They were telling of the encounter with farmer Owen.

“ It won’t do, you know, Black, to be watched by him,” cried Robson, savagely. “ If he is to pass his nights haunting the lane, the sooner the Trailing Indian knows it, the better.”

“ I wish Sir Dene Clanwaring had been sunk, before he refused to lease me the farm

in Mosy's place!" exclaimed Black. "He is going to cut a hollow somewhere now, to bring up waggons and carts quicker from Hurst Leet—smother him! As if we wanted more ways up here!"

"That's not much, Randy—a cutting. Owen *is*."

"Owen had better keep himself and his eyes for his own affairs; he may find himself in the wrong box if he attempts to look after mine," was Mr. Randy's comment. "The outcry's pretty hot, I hear at Worcester."

Geach laughed. "Nothing less than a gang from London, they say."

"I can't think how he could have been standing," resumed Robson, presently, returning to the subject of farmer Owen—for the encounter seemed to have made a most unpleasant impression on him. "The fence is right against the trees."

"No it's not," said Black; there's a strip o' pathway. And my brother Mosy, was fool enough to make it, as a short cut to the two-acre meadow. Owen has got some sheep there; and now that the lambing season's on, he or the shepherd is everlastingly out with 'em at night. One or t'other on 'em's sure to be out."

"But why need he halt in the pathway and push his ugly beard over the fence to watch the lane?" contended Robson. "What's it for, Randy?"

"How the devil should I know?" retorted Randy. "Here; lend a hand, you two."

The articles had been placed in a box. Black then opened a closet in the room, which had apparently no other egress, pushed up one of its panels, and got through the aperture, Robson and the box disappearing after him. Soon after they were back again, and the closet door and panel had been made fast, Mrs. Black knocked to say supper was waiting in the parlour. And the three went out to it.

We must return to Geoffry Clanwaring. Passing down the lane with his game-keeper, seeing nothing and suspecting nothing of the man hidden in the ditch, he had reached the end of the lane, when two people were observed approaching; one of whom was laughing gaily. A silvery, sweet laugh; that a little stirred the pulses of Mr. Geoffry. It was Maria Owen's. She had been spending the afternoon at Hurst Leet, and was returning attended by the house servant—a stout

red-cheeked and red-armed damsel, named Joan. Maria wore her gipsy cloak, its hood of scarlet drawn round her face and her pretty curls.

Geoffry Clanwaring turned back with Miss Owen ; the keeper pursued his way onwards, straight down the road. Arrived at Mr. Owen's gate, they stood to talk, and Joan went in.

“ Mamma was to have gone to tea with me, but she did not feel well enough this afternoon ; so they sent Joan to bring me home,” explained Maria, chattering and blushing, and her heart beating wildly for love of the handsome young man before her. He could see the rosy dimples in the moonlight, he could see the sweet eyes, cast down beneath the gaze of his. Every fibre within him thrilled in answer, for she was more to him than—ay, almost than heaven.

Love is no respecter of persons ; the fitness of things never enters into the god’s calculations. Between Geoffry Thomas Clanwaring, the baronet’s son, and Maria Owen, the obscure farmer’s daughter, there lay miles of that exacting gulf, called social position ; nevertheless, they had contrived to lapse into a passion for each other, than which nothing

could be more pure and ardent. Part them, and the whole world would be to each as a blank wilderness.

Sir Dene had three sons. The heir was entirely a fine gentleman, living chiefly in London, amidst his clubs and his gaieties and his friends in high life. The youngest was a soldier, already married, and serving in India. Geoffry, the second, remained at home, looking after things on the estate, making himself quite as useful as Drew the bailiff did. Geoffry might generally be seen in velveteen shooting-coat and leather or beaver leggings, tramping about on foot, or riding on horse-back, always, however, busy. It was whispered by Gander, a servant who had lived with them for years, that Sir Dene liked him the best of all his sons. The heir was cold and haughty ; the soldier improvident and cross-tempered ; Geoffry alone had never given anything but duty and affection to his father. Out and about the land daily, it was thus he had formed the acquaintance of Robert Owen, and thence of the family. It had become quite an ordinary matter now for Geoffry Clanwaring to run in and out of Harebell farm at will,

“ What were you laughing at, Maria ?” he

asked, as they stood there at the gate. " You and Joan ?"

" I was laughing at Joan. She had been telling me a tale of a sweetheart she had in her last place. It was the carter. He gave her up because she threw a can of buttermilk over him in a passion. Joan says he was only angry because he happened to have on a clean smock frock ; had it been a dirty one, he'd not have minded."

Geoffry laughed.

" Mr. Clanwaring, I must go in. Mamma will be sending after me."

" I saw George Arde to-day," he resumed, paying no attention to the hint—except that he held her hand a little tighter—for it lay in his.

" Oh did you ? Where ?"

" At Worcester. I went in about the sale of some barley, and met him in High Street."

" Did he say anything about Mary ?"

" No. Except that she was very delicate just now."

" Polly is always delicate."

" When are you going over there next, Maria ?"

" I don't know," she replied in a low, half-conscious tone. For the truth was, that

whenever she did go to Worcester, Mr. Geoffry invariably contrived to be there on the self-same day.

Thus they lingered, talking of one thing and another, oblivious of the lapse of time, and Maria continuing to run the risk of being sent for. No one came, however: for the best of all possible reasons—that it was not known she was there. Mrs. Owen and Mary Barber were at work together in the parlour, and Joan did not disturb them to tell of her entrance. The girl, experienced in the matter of sweethearts herself, knew what was what. But the time was really getting on.

“There has been an audacious robbery of gold and silver plate at one of the silversmiths,” observed Geoffry, suddenly thinking of it. “Worcester was up in arms: the Bow Street runners are down.”

“What a pity!” she cried. “I hope the thieves won’t come near us. Indeed, Mr. Clanwaring, I must go indoors.”

Placing her hand within his arm, he walked with her up the path and round to the front, slowly enough. At the garden gate between the tall holly hedge they halted again. There was not the slightest necessity for this: it

was not the way indoors ; took them, in short, a few steps out of it. Perhaps the truth was, that one was just as ready to make an excuse for lingering as the other. The garden shone out fitfully in the night, now bright, now dark : just now it was very dark, for the moon again lay under a large black cloud. Not five minutes since, another large black one had but cleared away.

Very dark. It might have been for that reason that Geoffry Clanwaring, leaning forward on the gate, threw his protecting arm round Maria, and drew her close to him.

“I must go in,” she whispered.

For answer, he turned up the sweet face, so lovely in its frilled scarlet hood, and took a kiss from the cherry lips. A kiss ; and then another.

“Oh, Mr. Clanwaring !”

“Now you shall go in, my darling—as it must be.”

The moon came out of her canopy bright as gold, flooding the garden and trees and house with her light. There ensued another minute of lingering. It was broken in upon by Mr. Owen himself. He saw his daughter run in ; he saw Geoffry standing there : and he seized on the opportunity to say what it

had been in his mind to say for some few days past. Namely : that, though his house was pleased and proud to receive the visits of his landlord's son, there must be no approach to intimacy with Maria.

"I understand," said Geoffry, after a pause.
"Would you object to me, Mr. Owen?"

"Somebody else would, sir ; and that's quite enough for me," was Robert Owen's answer.

"Who else would ?"

"Mr. Clanwaring, you must know who, better than I can tell you. Your father, Sir Dene."

"Maria is one that a prince might be proud to wed," said Geoffry, in his foolish impulsiveness.

Upon that, Mr. Owen spoke ; and very sensibly. Unequal marriages never did good in the end, he said. Moreover, he could not, and would not, have both his daughters' wedding above their proper station.

"Your eldest daughter has not wedded above her station," said Geoffry, resentfully.

"Indeed but she has, sir. You must see it for yourself."

"I'm sure George Arde is poor enough, Mr. Owen."

"Too poor. But he's a gentleman. And—suppose he were ever to come into Arde Hall? Not that there is much chance of it."

"Not a bit of chance. Old Arde says he shall never leave it to either kith or kin—the old skinflint! It would be a jolly good thing for George Arde and his wife if they got it."

"Well, I had rather Polly had married in her own station—a farmer, say, as I am. But, in regard to you, Mr. Clanwaring, there must be no thought of anything of the kind. Your father would never forgive you."

"If my father approved, would you approve, Mr. Owen?"

"Pardon me, sir, but that's a useless question to go into. Sir Dene never would approve."

"You can answer it for my own satisfaction," returned Geoffry, his pleasant, good-natured eyes going out beseechingly to the farmer's. "If things were smoothed for it in other quarters, and Sir Dene were willing, do you think well enough of me to give me Maria?"

"Yes, I do," was the honest answer. "I like you very much. But that's all beside the question, Mr. Clanwaring, as you well

know, and we must go back to the starting-point. There must be no thought of intimacy between you and Maria. If I saw an approach to anything of the sort, sir, I should feel that it lay in my duty to Sir Dene to forbid you my premises."

"Very well; perhaps you are right," answered Geoffry, slowly coming to reason. "I confess that I do like Maria, very much; but I should not care to bring trouble upon anybody; least of all, on my father. Time may alter things. Good night, Owen."

"You are not offended with me for speaking, Mr. Clanwaring?" said the farmer, as he met Geoffry's offered hand.

"Offended! Indeed, no. You have only done what a straightforward man would do. Good night."

"Good night, sir."

Geoffry Clanwaring set off on the run. He had told the gamekeeper to "go on slowly," and he would catch him up. They had a matter of business in hand to-night in the village—of which he had lost sight while lingering with Maria. At the corner which bounded the lane he halted for a moment, half inclined to turn along the road to the right and dash down the pathway opposite

the Dene gates. But, as he knew the keeper had taken the long road—for he had to call at the farrier's, and might be waiting there—he went straight on.

A rather lonely, rather narrow, and very hilly road, this. It was but a cross-country road at best; no stage-coaches passed on it. Geoffry went up one hill and down another; the way insensibly winding round always towards the village. In fact, to go from a given point, say the entrance to Arde Hall, right round to Hurst Leet, the highway described a horse-shoe, a circuit of two miles. At the corner of the lower turning, which brought the village straight onwards in the distance, stood the premises of the farrier and horse doctor. Cole was at work in the shed; and Geoffry went to it.

“Has Simmons been here, Cole?”

“Yes, sir; about half an hour ago. He called in to say that one of the horses be ill, and I am to be up the first thing in the morning.”

“Mind you are. It's Sir Dene's hunter. Good night.”

He went straight on to the village now, passing sundry dwellings, most of them labourers', on either side of the road, and

arrived at Hurst Leet. Simmons, however, was not to be found anywhere, and Geoffry Clanwaring had had a fruitless walk.

But it has afforded us an opportunity of seeing the road that Sir Dene was waging warfare with. That he was projecting this new cutting to avoid—to be called henceforward, as the reader will find, Dene Hollow.

CHAPTER IV.*

AN EPISODE IN THE LIFE OF MARY BARBER.

THIS chapter contains an experience that may almost be called the chief event of Mary Barber's life. *She* considered it as such. It occurred some years before the epoch we are at present writing of, and was essentially supernatural. In fact, a ghost story. Not one born of the fancy or imagination, but real—at least so far as the actors and witnesses in the circumstances connected with it believed. The facts were very peculiar: for my own part I do not see how they could be reasonably accounted for, or explained away. The

* This account of the ghost, seen by Mary Barber, formed the subject of a Christmas story, published some three or four years ago. I have deemed well to insert it in the present book, "Dene Hollow," though it cannot be said to hold connection with the story: and the reader may skip the chapter if he pleases. But for its being a real experience, and a very strange one, it would not have been retained.—E. W.

details are given with simple truth, just as they happened.

The Owens were not then living at Harebell Farm, but at some few miles distance across country, in the rural village of Hollow. Their dwelling house was a commodious one: and Mary Barber the ruling power in it, under her mistress. Mrs. Owen, delicate then, as always, was not capable of active, bustling management.

One Monday afternoon in September, Mrs. Owen was seated alone in her parlour, mending soiled muslins and laces in preparation for the next day's wash, when the door opened and Mary Barber came in, neat as usual, superior in appearance, inexpensive though her attire was, to an ordinary servant. She must have been tolerably young then—say six-and-thirty, perhaps—and yet she looked middle-aged.

“I've come to ask a fine thing, mistress, and I don't know what you'll say to me,” she began, in her strong country accent. “I want holiday to-morrow.”

“Holiday!” repeated Mrs. Owen, in evident surprise. “Why, Mary, to-morrow's washing-day.”

“Ay, it is; nobody knows it better than

me. But here's my sister come over about this wedding of Richard's. Nothing will do for 'em but I must go to it. She's talking a lot of nonsense ; saying it should be the turning-point in our coolness, and the healer of dissensions, and she won't go to church unless I go. As to bringing in dissensions," slightly added Mary Barber, "she's thinking of the two boys, not of me."

"Well, Mary, I suppose you must go."

"I'd not, though, missis, but that she seems to make so much of it. I never hardly saw Hester in such earnest before. It's very stupid of her. I said, from the first, I'd not go. What do them grand Laws want with me—or Richard, either ? No, indeed ! I never thought they'd get me to it—let alone the wash!"

"But you do wish to go, don't you, Mary ?" returned Mrs. Owen, scarcely understanding.

"Well, you see, now Hester's come herself, and making this fuss, I hardly like to hold out. They'd call me more pig-headed than they have done—and that needn't be. So, mistress, I suppose you must spare me for a few hours. I'll get things forward before I start in the morning, and be back early in

the afternoon ; I shan't want to stop with 'em, not I."

"Very well, Mary ; we shall manage, I dare say. Ask Mrs. Pickering to come in and see me before she goes. Perhaps she'll stay to tea with me."

"Not she," replied Mary ; "she's all cock-a-hoop to get back again. Richard and William are coming home early, she says."

Mary Barber shut the door ; she had stood holding the handle in her hand all the time ; and returned to the room she had left—a great barn of a room, where the children were accustomed to play. Mary was regarded more as a friend than a servant, but she did the work altogether of any two. She was generally called "Mary Barber," one of the children being named Mary. On Mrs. Owen's sick days, Mary Barber would shut herself up with the children in this remote barn of a room, and keep them in quietness, leaving the work to be done without her.

Mrs. Pickering was older by some years than Mary. The two sisters were much alike, tall, sensible-looking, hard-featured women, with large, well-formed foreheads, and honest, steady grey eyes. But Mrs. Pickering looked ill and careworn. She wore a

very nice violet silk gown, a dark Paisley shawl, and Leghorn bonnet. Mary Barber had been regarding the attire in silent condemnation ; except her one best gown, *she* had nothing but cottons.

"Well, Hester, the mistress says she'll spare me," was her announcement. "But as to getting over in time to go to church, I don't know that I can do it. There'll be a thousand and one things to do to-morrow morning, and I shall stop and put forward."

"You might get over in time, if you would, Mary."

"Perhaps I might, and perhaps I mightn't," was the plain answer. "It's a five-weeks' wash ; and the missis is as poorly as she can be. Look here, Hester—it's just this : I don't want to come. I *will* come, as you make such a clatter over it, and I'll eat a bit o' their wedding-cake, and drink a glass o' wine to their good luck ; but as to sitting down to breakfast—or whatever the meal is—with the Laws and their grand company, it's not to be supposed I'd do it. I know my place better. Neither would the Laws want me to."

"They said they'd welcome you."

"I daresay they did !" returned Mary,

with a sniff ; " but they'd think me a fool if I went, for all that. I shouldn't mind seeing 'em married, though, and I'll get over to the church, if I can. Anyway, I'll be in time to drink health to 'em before they start on their journey."

Mrs. Pickering rose. She knew it was of no use saying more. She wished good-bye to the children, went to Mrs. Owen's parlour for a few minutes, absolutely declining refreshment, and then prepared to walk home again. Mary attended her to the door.

" It's fine to be you—coming out in your puce silk on a week-day !" she burst out with, her tongue refusing to keep silence on the offending point any longer.

" I put it on this afternoon because I was expecting Mrs. Law," was the inoffensive answer. " She sent me word she'd come up to talk over the arrangements ; and then I got a message by their surgery boy, saying she was prevented. Don't it look nice, Mary ?" she added, taking a bit of the gown up in her fingers. " It's the first time I've put it on since it was turned. I kept it on to come here ; it seemed so cold to put it off for a cotton ; and I've been feeling always chill of late."

"What be you going to wear to-morrow?" demanded Mary Barber.

Mrs. Pickering laughed. "Something desperate smart. I can't stay to tell you,"

"You've got a gown a-purpose for it, I reckon," continued Mary, detaining her. "What sort is it?"

"A new fawn silk. There! Good-bye; I've a power of things to do at home to-night, and the boys are coming home to an early tea."

Mrs. Pickering walked away quickly as she spoke. Mary Barber, enjoining the two pretty girls and little Tom to be quiet, and not go in to tease their mamma, ran to the village shop to see if by good luck she could find there some white satin bonnet ribbon. William Owen, the eldest son, was at school in Worcester.

Rather to Mary Barber's surprise, Mrs. Smith produced a roll of white satin, encased carefully in cap-paper. She didn't always have such a thing by her, she said. Mary Barber bought four yards—some narrow to match, for her cap border—and set off home again. Hearing from the children that they had been "as quiet as mice," she dived into her pocket, and produced a large mellow

summer apple. Cutting it into four parts, she gave one to each.

Mrs. Pickering walked rapidly homewards. Hallow was (and is) situated about three miles from Worcester, and her house was between the two—nearer the city, however, than the village. After Hester Barber's marriage, her husband had got on in the world. A cottage and a couple of fields and a cow grew into—at least the fields did—many fields, and they into hop gardens. From being a successful hop-grower, John Pickering took an office in Worcester, and became a prosperous hop-merchant. He placed his two sons in it—well-educated youths; and on his death, his eldest son, Richard, then just twenty-one, succeeded him as its master. This was four years ago. Richard was to be married on the morrow to Helena Law, daughter of Mr. Law the surgeon; and Mary Barber, as you have heard, considered she should be out of place in the festivities.

And she was right. Over and over again had the Pickerings urged Mary to leave service, as a calling beneath her and them, and to live with themselves. Mary declined. As to living with them, she retorted, they knew

as well as she did there'd be no "getting on" together ; and help from them to set up a couple of rooms for herself, or an independent cottage, was what *she'd* never accept. She said it was "their pride ;" they said they only wanted her to be more comfortable. The contention ran on for years ; in fact, it was continuously running on in a sort of under-current, if it did not always rise to the surface ; and the result was a coldness, and not very frequent meetings. Mary Barber obstinately remained in her condition of servitude, and was called "pig-headed" for her pains.

Not much so, however, by Mrs. Pickering ; she understood very little of the world's social distinctions, and cared less ; and she had latterly had a great trouble upon her, beside which few things seemed of weight. For some time past there had been ill-feeling between her two sons : in her heart perhaps she most loved the younger, and, so far as she dared, took his part against the elder. Richard was the master, and overbearing ; William was four years the younger, and represented his brother's yoke. Richard was steady, and regular as clock-work ; William was rather given to go out of an evening,

spending time and money. Trifling sums of money had been missed from the office by Richard, from time to time ; he was as sure in his heart that William had helped himself to them as that they had disappeared, but William coolly denied it, and set down the accusation to his brother's prejudice. In point of fact, this was the chief origin of the ill-feeling ; but Richard Pickering was considerate, and had kept the petty thefts secret from his mother. She, poor woman, fondly hoped that this marriage of Richard's would heal all wounds, though not clearly seeing how or in what manner it could bear upon them. In one month William would be of age, and must become his brother's partner ; he would also come into his share of the property left by their father.

Mrs. Pickering went home ruminating on these things, and praying—oh how earnestly ! —that there should be peace between the brothers. Their house was surrounded by fields ; a very pretty, though small, dwelling of bright red brick, with green venetian outside shutters to the different windows ; jessamine trailed over the porch, over the sills of the sitting-room windows, on either side the entrance door. Many-coloured flowers

clustered round the green lawn in front ; and behind was a fold-yard on a very small scale, for they kept cows, and poultry, and pigs still. The land was somewhat low just here, and no glimpse of the Severn, winding along in front between its banks, could be caught ; but there was the fair city of Worcester beyond, with its fine cathedral, and the taper spire of St. Andrew's rising high against the blue sky.

The young Pickerings came home early that evening, as agreed upon : not, alas ! in the friendly spirit their mother had been hoping for, but in open quarrelling. They were both fine grown young men, with good features, dark hair, and the honest, sensible grey eyes of their mother ; Richard was grave in look ; William gay, with the pleasantest smile in the world. Poor Mrs. Pickering ! hasty words of wrath were spoken on either side, and for the first time she became acquainted with the losses at the office, and Richard's belief in his brother's dishonesty. It appeared that a far heavier loss than any preceding it had been discovered that afternoon.

"Oh, Richard !" she gasped ; "you don't know what you say. He would never do it."

"He has done it, mother—he must have

done it," was the elder son's answer. "No one else can get access to my desk, except old Stone. Would you have me suspect him?"

"Old Stone" was a faithful servant, a many-years' clerk and manager, entirely beyond suspicion, and there was no one else in the office. Mrs. Pickering felt a faintness stealing over her, but she had firm faith in her younger, her bright, her well-beloved son.

"Look here, mother," said Richard; "we know—at least I do, if you don't—that William's expenditure has been considerably beyond his salary. Whence has he derived the sums of money he has spent—that he does not deny he has spent? If I have kept these things from you, it was to save you pain: Stone has urged me to tell you of it over and over again."

"Hush, Richard! The money came from me."

William Pickering turned round; he had been carelessly standing at the window, looking out on the setting sun. For once his pleasant smile had given place to scorn.

"I'd not have told him so much, mother: *I* never have. If he is capable of casting

this suspicion on me, why not let him enjoy it. Times and again have I assured him I've never touched a sixpence of the money : I've told that interfering old Stone so ; and I might as well talk to the wind. Is it likely that I would touch it ? I could have knocked the old man down this afternoon when he accused me of being a 'disgrace' to my dead father."

It is of no use to pursue the quarrel, neither is there time for it. That Mrs. Pickering in her love, had privately furnished William with money from time to time was an indisputable fact, and Richard could not disbelieve his mother's word. But instead of its clearing up the matter, it only (so judged Richard) made it blacker. If he had been robbing the office, he had been, legally, robbing his mother ; words grew higher and higher, and the brothers, in their anger, spoke of a separation. This evening, the last of Richard's residence at home, was the most miserable his mother had ever spent, and she passed a great part of the night at her bed-side, praying that the matter might be cleared up, and the two brothers reconciled.

The morning rose bright and cloudless ; and Mary Barber was astir betimes. Wash-

ing-day in those days, and in a simple country household, meant washing-day. It most certainly did at Mrs. Owen's; everybody was expected to work, and did work, the master excepted. Mary put her best shoulder to the wheel that morning, got things forward, and started about ten o'clock. The wedding was fixed for eleven at All Saints' Church, and Mary calculated that she should get comfortably to the church just before the hour, and ensconce herself in an obscure corner of it, as she meant to do.

She was in her best: a soft fine grey cashmere gown, kept for high-days, a grey twilled silk shawl with a handsome sewn-on border of lilies and roses, and a cottage straw bonnet trimmed with the white satin ribbon, its inside border of real lace. That shawl might have been worn by a lady; it had been a present to Mary for her own wedding (which had been rudely frustrated through the faithlessness of man, and terribly sore was she upon it unto this day), and was as good as new, never coming out above once a year. She brought with her no cap, intending to be firm on the points of not remaining and not removing her bonnet; she'd step into Mr. Law's house, and drink to the bridegroom and

bride, and taste the cake, and she'd start back home again.

She took the field way ; it was pleasanter than the dusty road ; and went quickly on with her umbrella, a large green cotton thing, tied with a string round the middle, quite a foot in diameter. The skies were serenely bright, showing no prospect of rain for days to come, but Mary Barber would not have ventured out in her best without an umbrella to guard against contingencies for untold gold.

She had traversed nearly two-thirds of her way, and was in the last field but one before turning into the road. It was a large field, this, called popularly the hollow field, from the circumstance of a hollow or dell being in one part of it. This part Mary Barber had left behind her, and as she walked along the path that led mid-way through it, some church clocks chiming the half hour after ten, came distinctly to her ear in the stillness of the rarified air. "I've stepped out well," quoth she.

It was at this moment that she discerned some one seated on the stile at the end of the path that led into the next field. Very much to her surprise, as she advanced nearer, she saw it was her sister. Mrs. Pickering was

sitting sideways, her feet towards Worcester, her face turned to Mary, as if she was waiting for her, and would not take the trouble to get over. To use a common expression, Mary Barber could hardly believe her own eyes, and the proceeding by no means met with her approbation.

“Of all the simpletons!—to come and stick herself there to wait for me. And for what she knew I might have took the road way. They be thinking to get me with ‘em to church in the carriage!—but they won’t. I told her I’d not mix myself up in the grand doings: neither ought I to, and Hester’s common-sense must have gone a wool-gathering to wish it. Ah! she’s been running herself into that stitch in her side.”

The last remark was caused by her perceiving that Mrs. Pickering, whose left side was this way, had got her hand pressed upon her chest or heart. The doctors had warned Mrs. Pickering that any exertion by which this pain was brought on, might be dangerous. “Serve her right!” cried unsympathizing Mary Barber, who had no patience when people did foolish things.

And now she obtained a clear view of her sister’s dress. She wore the violet silk gown

of the previous afternoon, and a white bonnet and shawl. Mary, on the whole, regarded the attire with disparagement.

"Why, if she's not got on her puce gown ! Whatever's that for ? Where's the new fawn silk she talked of, I wonder ? I'd not go to my eldest son's wedding in a turned gown ; I'd have a new one, be it silk or stuff. That's just like Hester ; she never can bear to put on a new thing ; she'd rather——If I don't believe the shawl's one o' them beautiful Chaney crapes."

It looked a very nice shawl, and was glistening in the rays of the sun. That it was a China crape was nearly certain ; no other sort of shawl would have had so deep a fringe. China crape shawls in those days cost their price ; and Mary Barber condemned it at once, as connected with her sister.

"I say, Hester," she called out, as soon as she got near enough for her voice to reach the stile, "what on earth made you come here to meet me ?"

Mrs. Pickering made no reply, gave no token of recognition whatever, and Mary supposed she had not caught the words. Her face looked unusually pale, its expres-

sion mournfully sad and serious, its eyes turned on Mary with a fixed stare.

"Sure," thought Mary, "nothing can have fell out to stop the wedding! Richard's girl wouldn't run away as that faithless chap of mine did. Something's wrong, though, I can see, by her staring at me in that stony way, and never opening her mouth to speak. I say, Hester, is anything——Deuce take them strings again!"

The concluding apostrophe was addressed to her shoe-strings. To be smart, Mary Barber had put new galloon ribbon in her shoes, and one or other of them had been coming untied all the way, to her great wrath. Laying down her umbrella on the edge of the grass, and her folded handkerchief, which she had carried in her hand, atop of it, she stooped down and tied the shoe, giving the knot a good tug as additional security.

"Now, then, come undone again, and I'll—Bless me! where's she gone?"

In raising her head Mary Barber missed her sister; the stile was vacant. Hastening to it, she climbed over into the next field, and there stood in what might be called a paroxysm of astonishment, for no trace whatever was to be seen of Mrs. Pickering. It

was a large field, a hedge dividing it from the one she had just traversed, the path running across it before her. She looked here ; she looked there ; she looked everywhere : in vain. Mary Barber had once treated herself to witness the performance of a conjuror in the large room of the Bell, at Worcester ; she began to think he must have been at work here.

"Hester!" she called out, raising her voice to its utmost pitch, "Hester, where *be* you got to!"

The air took away the sound, and a bird aloft seemed to echo it, but there was no other answer. The woman stood like one moonstruck. Was it conjuring ?—or what else was it ? The hedge, a trim, well-kept, cropped hedge, afforded no spot for concealment ; there was no ditch or any other hiding-place—nothing but the broad open field, and no human being, save herself, stirring in it.

"Well, this beats bull-baiting," ejaculated Mary Barber, in the broad country phraseology in vogue in those days. "I'd better pinch myself to see whether I be awake or dreaming."

She turned herself about from side to side, she went back over the stile to the field she

had traversed, and stared about there ; but no trace could she see of Mrs. Pickering. Finally she passed over the stile again, and stood a moment to revolve matters.

“ She must have gone off somewhere on the run while I’d got my eyes down on that dratted shoe,” was the conclusion the woman came to. “ And more idiot she, when she knows running always brings on that queer pain at her heart.”

It might have been a reasonable solution had there been anywhere to run to : that is, had the field not been too broad and wide to admit a possibility of her running out of sight. In good truth there was no such possibility. Mary Barber continued her way across the field, and then, instead of pursuing her road to Worcester, she turned aside to the house of the Pickerings. That her sister could not have got back to it she knew, for the only way was the one she took. Trying the back door, she found it fastened, and, on passing round to the front, that was fastened also. There was no carriage waiting at the gate ; on the contrary, everything seemed silent and shut up. Mary Barber gave a sharp knock.

“ One would think you were all dead,” she

cried, as a maid-servant opened the door.
“They are gone, I suppose.”

“Yes, they are gone,” was the girl’s reply.
“My missis left about ten minutes since.”

“More than that, I know,” was the answering remark. “What made her come to meet me, Betsey ?”

“She didn’t come,” said Betsey.

“She did come,” said Mary Barber.

“She did not, ma’am,” persisted the servant.

“Why, my goodness gracious me, girl ! do you want to persuade me out of my senses ?” retorted Mary Barber in anger. “She came on as far as the Hollow Field, and sat herself down on the stile there, waiting for me to come up. I’ve got the use of my eyes, I hope.”

“Well, I don’t know, ma’am,” returned the girl dubiously. “I was with her at the moment she was starting, and I’m sure she’d no thought of going then. She was just going out at this door, eating her bit of bread and butter, when she turned back into the parlour and put down her green parasol, telling me to bring her small silk umbrella instead : it might rain, she said, fair as it looked. ‘And make haste, Betsey,’ she says to me,

“for it don’t want two minutes of the half hour, and I shan’t get to All Saints’ in time.””

“What half hour?” asked Mary Barber, in a hard, disputing sort of tone.

“The half hour after ten. Sure enough, in a minute or two our clock struck it.”

“Your clock must be uncommon wrong in its reckoning then,” was the woman’s rejoinder. “At half-past ten she was stuck on the stile looking out for me. It’s about ten minutes ago.”

It was about ten minutes since her mistress went out; but Betsey did not venture to contend further. Mary Barber always put down those who differed from her.

“After all, she has not took her umbrella,” resumed the girl. “I couldn’t find it in the stand, off by the kitchen; all the rest of the umbrellas was there, but not missis’s silk one, and when I ran back to tell her I thought it must be upstairs, she had gone. Gone at a fine pace too, Mary Barber, which you know is not good for her, for she was already out of sight, so I just shut the door, and drew the bolt. It’s a pity she drove it off so late.”

“What made her drive it off?”

"Well, there was one or two reasons. Her new fawn gown, such a beauty it is, never was sent home till this morning—I'd let that fashionable new Miss Reynolds make me another, I would!—and when missis had got it on, it wouldn't come to in the waist by the breadth of your two fingers, and she'd got her pain very bad, and couldn't be squeeged. So she had to fold it up again, and put on her turned puce——"

"*I saw,*" interrupted Mary Barber, cutting the revelation short. "I say, Betsey, what's her shawl? It looked to me like one o' them Chaney crapes."

"It's the most lovely Chaney crape you ever saw," replied the girl enthusiastically. "Mr. Richard made it a present to her. She didn't want to wear it, she said it was too grand, but he laughed at her. The fringe was that depth."

"And now, you obstinate thing," sharply put in Mary Barber, as the girl was extending her hands to show the depth of the fringe, "how could I have seen her in her puce gown, and how could I have seen her in the shawl unless she had come to meet me? I should as soon have expected to see myself in a satin train, as her in a Chaney crape shawl:

and Richard must have more money than wit to have bought it."

"And where is she now, then?" asked Betsey, to whom the argument certainly appeared conclusive. "Gone on by herself to the church?"

"Never you mind!" returned Mary Barber, not choosing to betray her ignorance upon the unsatisfactory point. "Don't you contradict your betters again, Betsey Marsh."

Betsey humbly took the reproof.

"Why could she not have had a carriage, and went properly?" resumed Mary Barber. "It might have cost money; but a son's marriage comes but once in a lifetime."

"The carriage came, and took off Mr. Richard, and she wouldn't go in it," said the girl. And then she proceeded, dropping her voice to a whisper, to tell of the unpleasantness of the previous evening, and of the subsequent events of the morning. Mr. William was up first, and went out without breakfast, leaving word he was gone to the office as usual, and should not attend the wedding. This she had to tell her mistress and Mr. Richard when they came downstairs; her mistress seemed dreadfully grieved, she looked as white as a sheet, and as soon as breakfast

was over she wrote a letter, and sent Hill with it into Worcester to Mr. William. "It was to tell him to come back and dress himself, and go with her to the wedding, I know," concluded the girl, "and that's why, waiting for him, she would not go with Mr. Richard when the carriage came, and why she stayed, herself, till the last minute. But Mr. William never came : and Hill's not come back either."

"Then why on earth did she come to meet me, instead of making the best of her way to the church ?" once more demanded Mary Barber.

"It's what I should ha' said she didn't do," retorted the girl ; "she never had no thoughts of going to meet you."

"If you say that again, I'll——Why, who's this ?"

The closing of the little iron gate at the foot of the garden had caused her to turn, and she saw William Pickering. He was flushed with the rapid walk from the town—conveyances were not to be hired at hasty will in Worcester then as they are now—and came up with a smile on his good-humoured face.

"I hope my mother's gone," he called out.

"Yes, sir," answered Betsey.

"So, you and Richard have been quarrelling again, I hear, and you must go off in a temper this morning," was Mary Barber's reproving salutation. "I'm glad you've had the grace to think better of it, Master William!"

The young man laughed. "The truth is, my mother's note was so peremptory—in a sort—that I had no choice but to obey it," he answered, "I was not in the office when Hill left it, but I came as soon as I could. Some hot water, Betsey. Look sharp."

"You'll not get to All Saints' in time," said Mary Barber.

"I'll have a try for it; they may be late themselves. What time is it now?" he continued, as he bounded up the stairs.

As if to answer him, the large kitchen clock at that moment rang out the quarter to eleven. It was a clock that struck the quarters: as many kitchen clocks did in those old-fashioned days.

"Is that clock right?" asked Mary Barber, remembering her conclusion that it could not be, and why; and feeling in a maze upon the past yet. "Just look at your watch, William, and tell me."

"It's never wrong," put in Betsey, as she

came hurrying out of the kitchen with the jug of hot water, probably deeming it a convenient juncture tacitly to maintain her own opinion. "It don't vary a minute in a year."

She said true. Nevertheless William Pickering, in courtesy to the request, halted on the stairs midway, and took his watch from his pocket. "It is quite right," he said. "Besides, I know that must be just about the time. You wait for me in the parlour, Mary, and we'll go on together."

She turned into the parlour generally used, and waited for him. The boys had always called her "Mary," short, following the habit of their father and mother. On the table lay Mrs. Pickering's green parasol, just as she had put it down.

In five minutes he was downstairs again, dressed ; as handsome a young man as might be—upright, frank, merry. Mary Barber told him how his mother had come to meet her, and how she had suddenly disappeared. He laughed, and said Mary must have fallen into a doze while tying her shoe. They were passing through Henwick when the clocks struck eleven.

"There !" exclaimed Mary Barber, "the wedding 'll have begun ?"

"Never mind," said he, gaily, "we shall get in for the tail."

They took the lower road, as being the nearest, cutting off the corner by the suburb of St. John's, as well as the new road, crossed the bridge over the sparkling Severn, and turned off to All Saints' Church just as the tardy bridal party drove up.

"I hope they have not been waiting for me!" exclaimed William Pickering. "Which carriage is my mother in, I wonder? I shall take her in."

"She won't be in the carriage; she was going straight into the church; Betsey said so!" snapped Mary Barber, excessively aggravated to find herself in the very midst of the alighting company. Richard Pickering drew up to his brother.

"Where's the mother?" he asked. "We have been waiting for her all this while."

"In the church, I think, if she's not with you. I am but come up myself now."

However, range their eyes as they would round the church when they got inside it, there was no sign of Mrs. Pickering. William, burying animosity for the occasion, stood by his brother at the altar, his groom's man, and the ceremony proceeded. Mary

Barber ensconced herself behind a remote pillar, peeping surreptitiously round it to watch the party out of church, Richard leading his very pretty bride.

"I'll let the ruck of 'em get into old Law's before me," quoth she to the female pew-opener.

And accordingly the "ruck" did get in, and then Mary Barber followed. She supposed Mrs. Pickering would be there, as did all. The conclusion drawn was, that she had not arrived in time for the ceremony, and so had gone straight to the surgeon's. His residence was not far from the church, and as Mary Barber slowly approached it, she saw quite a crowd of persons coming from the opposite way, in one of whom she recognized an officer of justice. Halting at the door to stare at these—and they seemed to be reciprocating the compliment by staring at her in a curious manner—William Pickering came out.

"What can have become of my mother, Mary?" he exclaimed. "I'm going home to see after her. She's not at Mrs. Law's."

"Why, where's she got to?" responded Mary Barber. "I'll tell you what, William Pickering," quickly added the woman, an idea

flashing across her, “she’s gone demented with the quarrelling of you two boys, and has wandered away in the fields ! I told you how strangely she stared at me from the stile.”

“Nonsense!” said the young man.

“Is it nonsense ? It—Whatever do you people want ?” broke off Mary Barber. For the persons she had noticed were surrounding them in a strange manner, hemming them in ominously. The officer laid his arm upon William Pickering.

“I’m sorry to say that I must take you prisoner, sir.”

“What for ?” coolly asked William.

“For murder !” was the answer. And as the terrible words fell on Mary Barber’s ear, a wild thought crossed her bewildered brain— Could he have murdered his mother ? Of course it was only her own previous train of ideas, connected with the non-appearance of her sister, that induced it.

Not so, however. Amidst the dire confusion that seemed at once to reign ; amid the indignant questionings of the bridal party, who came flocking out in their gay attire, the particulars were made known. Mr. Stone, the old clerk, had been found dead on the

office floor, an ugly wound in the back of his head. Richard Pickering, in his terror, cast a yearning, beseeching glance on his brother, as much as to say, Surely it has not come to this!

The events of the morning, as connected with this matter, appeared to have been as follows:—Mr. Stone had gone to the office at nine o'clock, as usual, and there, to his surprise, found William Pickering, opening the letters. The latter said he was not going to his brother's wedding, and the old clerk reproved him for it. William did not like this; one word led to another, and several harsh things were spoken. So far the office servant testified, a man named Dance, whose work lay chiefly in the warehouse amongst the hop-pockets, and who had come in for orders. They were still “jangling,” Dance said, when he left them. Subsequent to this, William Pickering went out to the warehouse, and to one or two more places. On his return, he found that his mother's outdoor man-of-all-work, Hill, had left a note for him; a large brewer in the town, named Corney, was also waiting to see him on business. When Mr. Corney left, he opened the note, the contents of which may as well be given:—

“ William ! you have never directly disobeyed me yet. I charge you, come back at once, and go with me to the church. Do you know that I have passed three parts of the night on my knees, praying that things may be cleared up between you and your brother !

“ YOUR LOVING MOTHER.”

After that nothing clearly was known. William Pickering said that when he quitted the office to go home, in obedience to his mother’s mandate, he left Mr. Stone at his desk writing ; but a short while afterwards the old clerk was found lying on the floor, with a terrible wound in the back of his head. It was quite evident he had been struck down while bending over the desk. The man Dance, who was sought for in the warehouse, and found, spoke of the quarrelling he had heard ; and hence the arrest of William Pickering.

Mary Barber’s first thought, amidst the confusion and the shock, was of her sister. If not broken to her softly, the news might kill her ; and the woman, abandoning cake, and wine, and company, before she had seen them, started off there and then in search

of Mrs. Pickering, not knowing in the least where to look for her, but taking naturally the way to her home.

“Surely she'll be coming in to join 'em, and I shall, perchance, meet her,” was the passing thought.

Not Mrs. Pickering did Mary Barber meet, but Hill, the man. He was coming down the road in a state of excitement, and Mary Barber stared in blank disbelief at his news: his mistress had been found on her bed—dead.

In an incredibly short time the woman seemed to get there, and met a surgeon coming out of the house. It was quite true. Mrs. Pickering was dead. With her face looking as if it were turned to stone, Mary Barber went up to the chamber. Betsey, the servant, her tears dropping fast, told the tale.

When Mary Barber and Mr. William had departed, she bolted the door again, and went back to her work in the kitchen. By and by, it occurred to her to wonder whether the silk umbrella was safe upstairs, or whether it had been lost from the stand: a few weeks before, one of their cotton umbrellas had been taken by a tramp. She ran up into her mistress's

room to look, and there was startled by seeing her mistress. She was sitting in an arm-chair by the bedside, her head leaning sideways on its back, and her left hand pressed on her heart. On the bed lay the silk umbrella, its cover partly taken off, and by its side a bit of bread and butter, half eaten. At the first moment the girl thought she was asleep ; but when she saw her face she knew it was something worse. Running out of the house in terror, she met Hill, who was then returning from Worcester, and sent him for the nearest surgeon. He came, and pronounced her to be quite dead. "She must have been dead," he said, "about an hour."

"What time was that?" interrupted Mary Barber, speaking sharply in her emotion.

tan/
"It was half-past eleven."

There could not be the slightest doubt as to the facts of the case. While the servant was sent by her mistress for the umbrella, and delayed through being unable to find it, Mrs. Pickering must have run up-stairs to her chamber, either remembering that it was there, or to look for it. She found it, and was taking off the case, putting down the bread-and butter she was eating, to do so (a piece of bread-and-butter which the maid

had just before brought to her), and must have then found herself ill, sat down in the chair, and died immediately. Her own medical attendant had warned her that any great excitement might prove suddenly fatal.

"It was the oddest thing, and I thought it at the time, though it went out of my mind again, that she should have disappeared from sight so soon," sobbed Betsey. "I don't think I was away much above a minute after the umbrella, and when I came back and found her gone, and looked out at the door, I couldn't see her anywhere. I looked in the garden, I looked down the path as far as my eyes would go. 'Why, missis must be lost!' says I, out loud. And she had left the front door wide open, too—and that ought to have told me she had not gone out of it. And I, like a fool, never to have remembered that she might have run upstairs, but just bolted the door and went about my work."

Mary Barber made no comment; a strange awe was stealing over her. This had occurred at half-past ten. It was at precisely that time she saw her sister on the stile.

"Betsey," she presently said, her voice subdued to a whisper, "if your mistress had

really gone out, as you supposed, was there any possibility of her coming in later without your knowledge?"

"No, there was not; she couldn't have done it," was the answer to the question; and Mary Barber had felt perfectly certain that it had not been possible, though she asked it. The only way to Mrs. Pickering's from the stile was the path she had taken herself, and she knew her sister had not gone on before her.

"I never unbolted either of the doors, back or front, after she (as I thought) went out, except when I undid the front for you," resumed the girl. "I don't dare to be in the house by myself with 'em open since that man frightened me last winter. No, no; missis neither went out nor come in; she just went upstairs to her room, and died. The doctor says he don't suppose she had a moment's warning."

It must have been so. Mary Barber gazed upon her as she lay back, upon the holiday attire she wore, all the counterpart of what she had seen on the stile. The puce silk gown looking as good as new; the really beautiful shawl, with its deep rich fringe; the white bonnet, which she now saw was of

plain corded silk. The doctor had closed the eyes, and put the left hand down straight ; otherwise she was as she was found. On the patchwork quilt of the bed lay the silk umbrella, the cover half taken off, and the bit of bread-and-butter, half eaten, lay beside it. Mary Barber gazed at all ; and an awful conviction came over her, that it was her sister's spirit she had seen on the stile. Never from that hour did she quite lose the sensation of nameless dread it brought in its wake.

"Yow see, now, Mrs. Barber, you must have been mistaken in thinking my missis went to meet you," said Betsey.

Mary Barber made no answer ; she only looked out straight before her with a gaze that seemed to be very far away.

What with one calamity and the other—for the news of William Pickering's apprehension soon travelled up—the house was like a fair the whole of the day. Richard Pickering, bridegroom though he was, was up there ; Mr. Law was there, and, on examination, confirmed the other doctor's opinion as to the momentarily sudden death ; numberless friends and acquaintances came in and went out again. For once in her life, Mary Barber was oblivious of the home wash, and her

promise to return early for it. She took her bonnet off, borrowed a cap of her poor sister's, and remained.

William Pickering was taken before the magistrates in the Guildhall for examination, late in the afternoon. His brother attended it, and—very much to her own surprise—so did Mary Barber. The accusation and the facts had revolved themselves into something tangible out of their original confusion; the prisoner was able to understand the grounds they had against him; and the solicitor, whom he called to his assistance, drove up in a gig to Mrs. Pickering's, and took possession of Mary Barber.

"What's the good of your whirling me off to the Guildhall?" she resentfully asked of him, three times over, as he drove back into Worcester. "I don't know anything about it; I never was inside that office of the Pickerings' in all my life."

"You'll see," said the lawyer, with a smile.

One thing was satisfactory—that old Mr. Stone had come to life again. The blow, though a very hard one, had stunned, but not killed him; he was, in fact, not injured beyond a reasonable probability of recovery. He had no knowledge of his assailant: who-

ever it was, he had become behind him, as he sat bending over his desk, and struck him down unawares.

The Guildhall was crowded : a case exciting so much interest had rarely occurred in Worcester. Independent of the station in life of the prisoner, and of his good looks, his youth, and his popularity with most people, there were the attendant circumstances—the marriage of his brother in the morning, the death of Mrs Pickering. Of the last sad fact they did not tell him. “Let him get his examination over, poor fellow!” said they in kindness. And he stood before the court, upright, frank, unfettered by grief. “He must have done it in a moment of passion,” said his sorrowing friends and the public ; for the facts seemed too clear against him for disbelief—the long-continued ill-feeling known to exist between him and the old clerk, who had persistently taken his brother Richard’s part ; the quarrelling of the morning, as heard by Dance, and which the prisoner did not deny ; and the absence of any one else in the office. Richard Pickering, his breast beating with a horrible conviction that none else could have been guilty, was not one publicly to denounce his brother. He affected to assume

his innocence, and he stood by him to afford him all the countenance in his power.

The facts were testified to—those gathered on the first moment of discovery, and others since. Dance spoke of the jangling—as he still called it—between the clerk and his young master. Mr. Corney proved his visit, and that upon its termination he left Mr. Stone and William Pickering alone, and he could see that they were not friendly. This was about twenty minutes past ten. Mr. Corney added, in answer to a question, that he had heard nothing of William Pickering's intention to depart home; on the contrary, he said he should be at the office all day. Subsequently——

Yes, but then he had not opened his mother's note, interrupted the prisoner, who, up to this point, acknowledged all that was said to be correct. But, he continued, the instant he read the note, he started for home, knowing how little time there was to lose; and he told old Stone that he need not be cross on Richard's account any longer, for after all he was going to be his best man. He knew no more.

Mr. Corney resumed: A little before eleven he went back to the office, to say he'd take

the hops at the price offered, and was horrified to find old Mr. Stone on the ground, as he thought, dead. He raised an alarm ; some people ran in from the streets, and he went himself in search of Dance, whom he found in the warehouse ; somebody else ran for a constable, others for a surgeon. Of course the conclusion arrived at was, that Mr. William Pickering had done the deed.

The bench appeared to be arriving at the same.

"Not so fast, gentlemen," said William Pickering's lawyer ; and he put forth another witness.

It was Mr. Kilpin, the hop-merchant, a gentleman well known in the town. He deposed that he had called in at the Messrs. Pickering's office that morning between half-past ten and eleven. Mr. Stone was alone, writing at his desk. He stayed talking to him three or four minutes, and left at a quarter to eleven. He was enabled to state the time positively from the fact, that——

"Why, then, it could not have been William Pickering ; he was at home at that very time," burst forth Mary Barber.

The bench silenced her ; but she saw now why she had been brought to the Guildhall.

Mr. Kilpin resumed, taking up the thread of his sentence as if no interruption had occurred—

“From the fact, that as I passed St. Nicholas’ Church, it chimed the three-quarters past ten. I was on my way to catch the Pershore coach, for I was going by it as far as Whittington, and it was at that moment turning the corner of Broad Street. I had to make a run for it, and to holla out, and the coachman pulled up opposite the Old Bank. When I got back from Whittington this afternoon,” added the witness, “I accidentally met Mr. William Pickering’s lawyer, and learnt what had occurred.”

Next came the evidence of Mary Barber, that William Pickering was in his mother’s house at three-quarters past ten. Of course there could be no further doubt of his innocence after this. Meanwhile the prisoner had been writing a few lines with a pencil on a piece of paper, and it was passed over to his brother. Something in the demeanour of one of the witnesses as he gave his evidence had powerfully struck him.

“I have an idea, Richard, that the guilty man is Dance. Take care that he does not escape. If he has done this, he may also have

been the pilferer of your petty cash. Try and get it all cleared up, for the sake of the mother's peace."

"For the sake of the mother's peace!" echoed Richard, with an aching heart. "Poor William little dreams of the blow in store for him."

He did not dream, Richard Pickering ; he acted. Giving a hint to the officer to look after Dance, he pressed up to his brother, then being released from custody.

"William," he whispered, "tell me the truth in this solemn moment—and it is more sadly solemn than you are as yet cognisant of—have you really not touched that missing money ? As I lay awake last night thinking of it, I began to fancy I might have been making a mistake all through. If so——"

"If so, we shall be the good friends that we used to be," heartily interrupted William, as he clasped his brother's ready hand. "On my sacred word, I never touched it ; I could not do so : and you must have been prejudiced to fancy it. I'll lay any money Dance will turn out to have been the black sheep. Both looks and tones were false as he gave his evidence."

And William Pickering was right. Dance

was so effectually “looked after” that night, that some ugly facts came out, and he was quietly taken into custody. True enough, the black sheep had been nobody else. He had skilfully pilfered the petty sums of money ; he had struck down Mr. Stone as he sat at his desk, to take a couple of sovereigns he saw lying in it. The old gentleman recovered, and gave evidence on the trial at the following March Assizes, and Richard and William Pickering from henceforth were more closely knit together.

But the singular circumstances attendant on the death of Mrs. Pickering—her apparition (for could it be anything less ?) that appeared to Mary Barber—became public property. People talked of it with timid glances and hushed voices ; and for a long while neither girl nor woman would pass through the two fields alone.

And that is the ending. And if I have been unduly minute in regard to the dress, or other points, I only reiterate the minuteness given at the time by Mary Barber. She fully believed, and she was good, and honest, and truthful, that the spirit of her sister came to lead her to the house (where other-

wise she would not have gone), there to meet William Pickering, and be the means of establishing his innocence : and would so believe to her dying day.

And now, the episode related, we go on with the story of Dene Hollow.

CHAPTER V.

THE SHADOW ON THE HOLLOW.

IT was lovely autumn weather. The Beech-hurst Dene woods were glowing with their rich tints in the October sunshine; the sky was blue and cloudless as in the sweetest day of summer.

Turning out at the lodge gates of Beech-hurst Dene, was a kind of mail phaeton; a high yellow vehicle, all the fashion at the period. The horses were iron-grey; fine, valuable animals; high steppers, but steady withal, and much like their owner, Sir Dene Clanwaring. Sir Dene sat in the carriage to-day by the side of his son Geoffry, who was driving. Sweeping out of the avenue right across the highway, Geoffry turned the horses' heads down a road that looked newly made.

New, it was. Sir Dene Clanwaring had

carried out his project—some deemed it his folly—and lost no time in completing what he had set his mind upon—a near way to the village of Hurst Leet. It was a fine, white, broad road; leading from Sir Dene's gates downwards—for the ground descended, you remember—and winding round right into the middle of the hamlet. Hurst Leet was proud of it. Sir Dene was proud of it. It had cost Sir Dene more funds than he had believed possible; a costly toy, he was apt to whisper in the privacy of his own heart; but nevertheless he could afford it, and he said complacently that the convenience of the road would well repay its outlay. Some three weeks had elapsed now since it was finished; and Sir Dene had driven down and up it nearly every day since.

All trace of the Widow Barber's cottage was gone. That estimable, but (in the opinion of Mr. Drew) cantankerous old lady, had been forced out of her life-long home. There had been a scene at her departure. Lady-day—the period by which she was ordered to be gone—came and passed; and Mrs. Barber had neither removed herself nor her chattels. Another day's grace they gave her, together with a peremptory command:

but the widow did not stir. She had lived in the old place for six-and-seventy years, she pleaded ; she could not in the nature of things, last much longer—oh if they would but let her stay in it for that short remaining time ! Earnestly did she pray for this boon as though she had been praying for her life. Sir Dene was made acquainted with this contumacious behaviour—doubly cantankerous, wrathful Drew called her now—and he, Sir Dene, full of wrath also, issued the edict for her ejection. Geoffry Clanwaring, ever good-hearted, alone put in a protest, asking his father to grant the poor distressed woman's prayer, seconding her plea that it could not be for long. But Sir Dene sharply told his son not to be foolish—the new road could not wait for *her* pleasure. So, on the following morning, sundry men presented themselves at the Widow Barber's, quietly but forcibly put her goods outside the door, and turned her cow and pig and chickens into the road. She had to follow them : and she went meekly forth, weeping and wringing her hands. Mary Barber got a couple of rooms for her mother and some of her furniture to take refuge in ; and the cow and pig and fowls were sold to the highest bidder on the spot. But the fact

created a great deal of scandal in the neighbourhood, and Sir Dene got some harsh blame. Sir Dene excused himself by saying that the extreme measure of ejecting her in that very summary manner belonged to his bailiff, Drew. But he could not get out of the fact that he had given his edict for her removal : and Jonathan Drew might have reasonably retorted on the grumblers with the question—How else was he to get the old woman out when she refused to go ?

As if tormented by the fear that she might be coming back again—after the fashion of the slippers in the Eastern tale—the men lost not a moment in commencing the work of destruction. Some bricks were out of the walls before the weeping woman was beyond view. A rumour went abroad of what was going on, and numbers of gazers came flocking up to watch. They stayed to see it, talking freely. The doors were off then, the windows out. The two chimneys could be no more seen. What with the work of dismantling, with the goods lying in a heap outside, with the let-loose cow and pig, and what with the increasing spectators, such a scene of excitement and confusion had not been witnessed by the rural population in their lives. It

remained on their memories as an epoch of local history, to be talked of at convivial meetings and related by father to son : Sir Dene Clanwaring's turning out of the poor old Widow Barber, when she was nigh upon her eightieth year !

Hands were quick. On the following day the rubbish of bricks and mortar was ready to be carted away ; and on the subsequent morning the new road was begun. Begun at both ends : at the upper one opposite the gates of Beechhurst Dene ; at the lower one at Hurst Leet. Sir Dene was all impatience for the way to be completed, and many hands made light work. Never a thought cast he to the grief of the unhappy woman who had been rudely thrust from her shell, and whose heart was breaking. Sir Dene was not by nature a hard or harsh man ; but he had certainly acted both hardly and harshly in this.

“So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun : and beheld the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter ; and on the side of their oppressors there was power ; but they had no comforter.”

If ever there was a signal exemplification of the truthful teaching of one, to whom God had given more than earthly wisdom, it surely existed in this instance.

And now, behold the beautiful road completed—smooth, compact, level as a bowling-green. See it this early morning as Sir Dene drives down it. The hill is at this end, commencing at the very onset; a long, hill, but a gentle one: its descent not steep at all; not enough to cause good horses to slacken speed, either down or up. No more trace is to be seen of the widow's cottage, of its garden, pig-sty, cow-shed, than if they had never existed: the new road runs right through the site. As to the meadow where her cow was wont to graze, Sir Dene has ploughed it up; fencing it in from the road. On the other side, the pathway remains still; the high bank above it remains; and the extending branches of the towering, waving elm trees cast their shadows on the road in the sunlight, just as the same shadows had used to be cast on the cottage. A fine road: and just now the pride of Sir Dene Clanwaring's heart. It had not been Sir Dene's intention to bestow upon it any particular name: he did not think about it; but the workmen

when making it, began to speak of it familiarly amidst themselves as the hollow —probably because they had a portion of it to hollow out. This was caught up by Hurst Leet, and converted into Dene's Hollow. The appellation grew at length into "Dene Hollow." Dene Hollow it remained.

Away they bowled, Sir Dene and his son. Geoffry, an experienced driver, had the reins well in hand. The calm, bright, lovely autumn day was good to be out in.

"Who's that, Geoffry?" asked the baronet, as a tall woman, her face nearly hidden under its large quilted bonnet of faded green silk, passed on the path, and curtsied to Sir Dene.

"It is Mary Barber, sir." And Geoffry silently wondered that the woman upon whose mother had been committed that act of injustice, should continue to render active homage to Sir Dene. But manners in those days were widely different from what they are in these : the reverence for the great was an institution.

"Oh, ay ; servant at Farmer Owen's, I believe," remarked Sir Dene airily : for indeed the episode of the ejection, together with

Mary Barber's pleading visit, had well-nigh passed from his mind : at least, it had lost its sting of annoyance. "I didn't know her in that poke-bonnet. How is that daughter of Owen's, Geoffry ? — she who married old Arde's relative. Any better ?—You go there sometimes, don't you ?"

"To George Arde's ?—Now and then, sir, when I am at Worcester. Mrs. Arde is ill still."

"Talking of Owen, he wants his barn—Take care, Geoff."

Without the slightest warning, without any apparent cause, the horses had started. Both of them. Started violently, as if in some great terror, and sprung right across the road with a bound. It was just in the spot where the cottage had been. Geoffry Clanwaring did all that practised driver could do ; but it was as nothing. The frightened animals bounded on the bank and off again, upsetting the phaeton. There they stood, plunging and kicking.

Geoffry was on his legs in an instant ; uninjured, save for a bruise on the right shoulder and elbow—which he did not feel until later. Some men, who happened to be passing on the upper road by the gates of

Beechhurst Dene, came running down. The traces were cut, one of the shivering horses fell, and lay still; the other they soothed to quietness.

Which gave them time to look into the condition of Sir Dene. He had been pitched over Geoffry's head, and was of course much shaken. Moreover, he could not get up without assistance. There was some damage to one of his ankles. A severe sprain, they found; not a fracture.

"It might have been worse," remarked Sir Dene. "What in the world was it that frightened the horses, Geoffry?"

"I don't know, sir: I am lost in wondering," was Geoffry's puzzled answer. "There was nothing whatever to startle them."

"I am sure I saw nothing."

"There was nothing. Not a creature was near us, human or animal. How shall we get you home, sir?"

"Oh, I can manage to limp up, with your arm on one side, and somebody else's on the other," returned the baronet. "I hope the horses are all right. It might have been worse for all of us, Geoff, my boy."

"Indeed, it might, father."

Yes it might have been worse. But never-

theless one of the horses, in plunging, had fatally injured himself, and he had to be shot. Cole, the farrier, had a day or two's hope over it—that he could save him—but it proved futile. Sir Dene was in a fine way over that, and told Cole he would almost as soon have been shot himself. The affair created nearly as much stir and talk in Hurst Leet, as the turning out of the Widow Barber had done.

Two or three evenings subsequent to this, Mary Barber set off to see her mother—a small jug of buttered-ale in her hand, which Mrs. Owen had caused Mary to make. "Buttered-ale" was a cordial thought much of in those days, and often sent by the wealthy to the aged or sick. Mrs. Barber had found refuge with John Pound and his wife, renting their two upper rooms. Or, rather, one room and a loft: the last being needed to stow away the portion of her spare furniture that had not been sold. The cottage was situated on the upper road, near Arde Hall; Pound being Squire Arde's waggoner.

Mary Barber put her best foot foremost; not only because it looked likely to rain, but that the buttered-ale should reach her mother while it was hot. The old lady was seated

on the bit of carpet before the fire ; her head leaning sideways on a chair.

“ Why, mother, you be low in the world ! ” was Mary’s salutation. “ What be you down there for ? ”

Mrs. Barber got up without making any particular answer, and took her seat in the chair. “ It’s a bit shivery to-night, ain’t it, child ? ” she asked. And a spectator might have smiled at tall, hard, bony, middle-aged Mary Barber being addressed as “ child.”

“ No, it’s quite warm, mother.”

Could it be that this poor shrunken creature was the once plump, healthy, well-conditioned woman who had lived in that disputed cottage ! Was it possible that only a few months had made so great a change ? Alas, yes. And the marvel was that she had lasted as long as this.

Literally she was no better than skin and bone. The face had lost its roundness, the cheeks their fresh tinge ; the eyes were sunken, and dim with a sadness that might be seen and felt. Nothing had apparently ailed her to cause the change ; her bodily health, save that the appetite had faded, had seemed not to suffer. But inward grief, when it is hopeless and excessive, induces decay

more rapidly in the aged than sickness of body. Old Hester Barber's heart was broken.

"I've not been able to run down this last two days, mother, as we've had our big wash on," said Mary, looking rather keenly at the worn face by the help of the fire-light, for she thought it was more changed than ever. She fancied, moreover, that it had a grey kind of tinge on it, which she had never observed before: and she did not much like to see it now. "Here's a nice drop of buttered-ale, that the missis has sent: it'll do you good."

"The missis is over kind, Mary; carry back my duty to her and my best thanks. But I don't feel as if I could touch it, child. I don't feel to want nothing."

"That's all nonsense, mother. I'll light the candle."

Holding the candle, so that its light fell on her mother's face, Mary Barber scanned it well. Yes, it was certainly grey to-night, with a peculiar, leaden greyness. She put the buttered-ale into a basin, and got a spoon.

"Now, then, mother, sup it up afore it's quite cold. Never mind about not wanting it: it'll cheer you up and warm you whether you want it or not."

Holding the basin so that it rested on her knee, the dying woman—for she was dying—sipped a few slow spoonfuls. Mary sat opposite, chatting.

“Did ye hear o’ the accident to Sir Dene Clanwaring, mother?”

“Ay, I heerd on’t. Pound, he come up stairs here o’ purpose to tell me.”

“It’s cost a sight o’ money to mend the carriage, Cole’s son says. And they’ve had to shoot the best horse.”

Mrs. Barber, her spoon resting passive in the buttered-ale, shook her head in solemn silence.

“I had passed ‘em not a minute afore, coming up the path from Hurst Leet, where I had been on an errand for missis,” continued Mary. “All fine and grand it looked, that turn-out; the horses, for power and safety, you might have took a lease on. Before I had well got into the upper road by the gates, there was a startling noise down there, and I looked back. Mother, you might have floored me with a word when I see the carriage, and the two gentlemen lying on the ground, and the cattle plunging.”

“Ay, ay,” murmured Mrs. Barber.

“I didn’t believe my own eyes. And what

had done it I could not think, for they had been going along as steady as might be. They don't know what in the world it could ha' been that the horses started at. Young Mr. Clanwaring was at our house yesterday, and I heard him tell the master that it 'ud always be a puzzle to him. Eat the stuff, mother."

"It was the Shadow," remarked the old woman, dropping her voice almost to a whisper. "I'd lay my life, Mary, 'twas the Shadow."

"The what?" cried Mary.

"The Shadow."

Mary Barber, who had really not caught the word at first, supposed that this must allude to the shadows cast on the road by the trees. To any one but her mother she would have met the assertion with unsparing ridicule.

"'Twas not likely to have been *that*, mother. Why, the trees be there always; and their shadows too, when the sun's behind 'em. Them horses' feet feel just as much at home amid the shadows as they do amid the stones."

"I said the Shadow, Mary. Not the shadows o' the trees."

“ What Shadow ?”

“ The one I saw on the road.”

Mary Barber believed the old mind was wandering. She stared for a minute without speaking.

“ Eat your buttered-ale, mother.”

Instead of that, Mrs. Barber stretched out her withered arm and put the basin down on the table at her elbow.

“ There’s a shadow on that road, child. The poor dumb animals saw it, and were frightened at it. They see sometimes what man can’t see. Maybe, it’ll come now and again at will, to lie on the Hollow.”

Mary Barber was sufficiently superstitious herself, and had seen at least one ghost, as her friends knew; but she was wholly at fault in this. Instead of debating the point, she stared harder than before at the grey face.

“ It’s a shadow to frighten the best of horses, it is, an’ they get to see it, Mary. It frightened me.”

“ Be you a wandering, mother ?” demanded Mary Barber, in rather a hard tone.

“ Me a wandering ! What put that in your head, child ?”

“ Why, what else is it ? A talking in this way about shadows ?”

"How long is it since this new road was opened?" rejoined Mrs. Barber—and certainly, in all save the subject, she seemed to be quite as rational as usual. "What do they call it again—Hollow Dene?"

"Dene Hollow. It's more than three weeks now."

"Ay. Three weeks o' Tuesday last. John Pound, he comes up stairs the evening afore; Monday, that was; and said the workmen was a clearing off their tools, and the road 'ud be open to the parish on the morrow. When the morrow came, I thought I'd put on my old red cloak and go out and take a look at it. 'Twas a fine, sunshiny, beautiful day, warm for September. I got to the place, Mary; and I leaned my arms on the fence opposite the Dene gates, and looked at it. A fine smooth road it was, a'most fine enough to have broke an old woman's heart for. I didn't know the place again. Not a brick was there left o' the poor homestead; not as much as a stone to mark out where it had been. 'Twas all swep clean away; the walls, and the yellow jes'min that used to climb on 'em."

"It's said they've got that yellow jes'min rooted now at Beechhurst Dene," interrupted

Mary Barber. “ ‘Twas rare and flourishing always.”

“ But while my eyes looked this way and that,” pursued Mrs. Barber, “ a trying to tell whether the home had stood a inch nearer or further, they grew to see that there was a shadow lying on the road. An awful kind of shadow, Mary, just about in the spot where the house had stood. These eyes saw it, child. And they’d never seen anything like it afore.”

“ Was it the shape of the house ?” questioned Mary—perhaps as much in mockery as earnestness.

“ It wasn’t any shape at all. It was just as though a *darkness* lay on that part o’ the hollow; or as if you were looking at it through smoked glass. Mary, I’ll tell you what it put me in mind of—the valley of the shadow of death.”

“ Mother !”

“ It did.”

“ I don’t think it’s right to say that.”

“ I’d not be the one to say anything wrong. But truth’s truth ; and the thought came into my mind as I stood there.”

“ What was it like ?” questioned Mary Barber, in a somewhat more reverent tone.

“ It was just a shadow of darkness ; nothing

else. But there was nothing to throw it there, and it made me tremble all over. I've trembled since when I think of it. Randy Black came by at the moment, and I asked him to look—there has been a good deal o' talk again Black in the place, but the man has always showed himself civil to me. He stopped and put his two arms on the rail beside me, and looked on to where I pointed; but he could not see it. He couldn't see it. He said it was as fine and bright all down the new road, every inch on't, as it was that day elsewhere. But the Shadow was there, Mary, all the same. You couldn't tell where it begun or where it ended: just that bit o' the road—ten or twenty yards, maybe—lay in the dark."

To hear Mrs. Barber tell this, her tone subdued to awe, her dim eyes gazing into the fire as though she could see the Shadow there, her whole manner and bearing imparting an impression solemnly earnest, brought a curious sensation to Mary.

"I will take a look myself the next time I pass by, mother."

Mrs. Barber shook her head. "You mightn't see anything. I don't think you will. I went out again the next day and

couldn't see it. Brooding over it here since, it has come to me to think that perhaps no other human eye, save mine, ever will see it. Black couldn't. But the Shadow was there all the while he looked: never a doubt of that."

"It has a curious sound to hear," was Mary Barber's answer.

"Ay. But it's true. I never was surer of anything in this world. Well, I'd a'most forgot it, Mary: I thought it was just a thing, unaccountable, that had come, and passed. But when John Pound brought news o' the upset in that same spot, saying it was quite a mystery what had startled the horses, for there was nobody a-nigh and nothing to cause it, it flashed over me that they must have seen the same Shadow that I saw—and I don't know how I felt, so struck and dumbfounded. It's to be hoped it'll never come there again. Sir Dene turned me out," added the old woman after a pause, "but I don't wish him ill. I'd do him any good if it lay in my power."

"Well, mother, *I* feel sore at him; I can tell you that."

"Ay, so did I, at first. But the Lord has been good and shown me a bit of His light.

When Heaven's opening to us, Mary, we are glad to forgive those that have injured us. I didn't think enough o' these things till I came here—mercy, and charity, and forgiveness to others—and my own sins and mistakes. I never might have thought of 'em. And so—and so, perhaps, it has all happened for the best. One must get one's heart broke, as mine's been, before one can be at full love and peace with all the world, friends and enemies."

Mary Barber did not quite know what to make of her mother. She had never seen her like this. All Mrs. Barber had been noted for since she lost her home, was shrinking, silent abstraction. She would answer questions put to her, but rarely spoke of her own accord.

"I wish you'd finish that buttered-ale, mother."

Mrs. Barber took a sip or two, and then let the spoon fall again.

"I can't, Mary. The heart goes again it; and something seems wrong with my swallow. Leave it be: maybe I'll try it later."

"Shall I help you to get to bed, mother?"

"No. 'Tisn't time."

"I must be going soon. Is there anything else I can do?"

"You may read just a few verses o' the Bible, if you like. My sight's got good for nothing."

More and more amazed, for Mary had never heard such a request from her mother on a week-day, she got up to reach the Bible—one that had been in use on Sundays as long as she could remember. But she suddenly discovered that she had not brought her spectacles with her—and upon looking for her mother's, could not find them. Mrs. Barber seemed disappointed.

"Oh, well, never mind. It wouldn't have took you five minutes, Mary."

"It's not the time, mother; it is that I can't see. Where's the large Bible—father's? I could see the print o' that."

It was on the top shelf of the press by the bed, and Mary had to stand on a stool to get it down. A large Bible covered with green baize, that had been Thomas Barber's; one they never used.

She dusted it, sat down, and read the chapter asked for—the 14th of St. John. Mrs. Barber listened attentively.

"Ay, ay," she murmured when it was over,

“many mansions *there*. There’ll be no sorrow up there, child, and no frightening shadow.”

“I wonder what’s inside this cover?” cried Mary, who, in passing her hand abstractedly over the green baize, in a minute’s reverie, found that something lay between it and the book.

“There’s nothing there.”

“There is, mother. It feels like a thickish letter. May I look?”

“You can look. I know there’s nothing.”

Cutting the thread that confined the covering, she took it off, and found a piece of brown paper folded together, with two or three papers inside it. Had Mary Barber’s pulses been given to flutter, they had certainly fluttered then—for a sure prevision, like an instinct, told her what was coming. Two of them were old receipts for rent: the other was the missing paper, given by Mr. Honeythorn.

“Here it is at last, mother!”

But the time had gone by for Mrs. Barber to be moved about anything in this world. She just looked round from the fire, but did not take the document in her hand.

“I remember now: I did put it there. I never thought o’ the Bible when we were looking for it. Every other place but that.

You'll show it to Sir Dene, Mary, that he may see what I said was true."

"Yes, I'll show it to Sir Dene—and to others also," was the emphatic answer.

Mary Barber wished her mother good night, again urging the buttered-ale upon her, and departed, the paper safely stowed away in her pocket. She stepped into Mrs. Pound's kitchen to say a word.

"You'll give a look upstairs to mother afore you go to bed, Matty Pound. She seems queer to-night."

"How—queer?" asked Matty Pound, who sat mending her husband's Sunday coat.

"Well, I hardly know. She don't seem like she always does. She won't drink the buttered-ale I brought."

Mrs. Pound thought the state must be serious not to take *that*. "I'll be sure and go up," said she.

"And if she should be worse in the morning, send little Jack to the farm to let me know, please. Our wash is not got up yet, and we be a going to brew to-morrow, so I can't possibly get out afore night—unless it's for something particular. If she should become ill, we must get Mr. Priar to her. Good night, Matty Pound."

Matty Pound responded to the salutation, and Mary Barber went home. The paper in her pocket felt as good as though it had been a hundred-pound note there.

"My poor mother always said she hoped the paper would come to light before she died. Sir Dene 'll see whether she was telling lies now! And Jonathan Drew, he'll see—but *he's not worth a thought o' salt.*"

On the following morning Mary Barber was toasting some bacon in the kitchen for her master's breakfast, when she was surprised by the appearance of John Pound. Not little Jack; John himself. He came to bring her ill news—which he got out awkwardly. Mrs. Barber was dead.

Matty Pound had seen her to bed the night before, all comfortable. Upon going into the room in the morning, they found her dead. She had died quietly in her sleep.

"The Squire telled me to come up t'ye," cried Pound to the dismayed Mary Barber. "He was passing, and heard what 'twas, and said 'Go up at once, never mind t' work for a bit.' Matty says there bain't no call to fret too much: she must ha' gone off wi'out pain as quank as a lamb."

Ay. The broken heart was at rest.

CHAPTER VI.

IN ST. PETER'S CHURCH.

IN a small but pretty house within the environs of St. Peter's parish in the suburbs of the city of Worcester, sat four people in the growing dusk of a November afternoon : George Arde and his wife ; Maria Owen, and Geoffry Clanwaring.

George Arde, a man of middle height, of dark eyes and hair, with a pale, honest, but plain face, somewhat stern in its character, was about thirty. He had small, independent means, derived from his hop-yards. When it was a good year for hops, George Arde was flourishing ; when the hops failed, he had to look after his shillings as well as his pounds. Taking one year with another, his income averaged perhaps two hundred pounds. No great excess of means : and it may appear singular that Farmer Owen should have re-

gretted his daughter's marriage to him, on the score that it exalted her above her station. But his view of it was right. George Arde was a gentleman by birth, and well connected ; he moved in a sphere above that of the farmer ; one to which the latter would not have been admitted on an equality. At the time of the marriage Mr. Owen had protested against it—yielding at last only a reluctant consent ; but George Arde, a willing captive to Mary Owen's beauty, would not hear of giving her up. As to the remote contingency that he might succeed to Squire Arde's wealth, none looked on it as a surer chimera than George himself. He and the Squire were not very nearly related ; George had never received the smallest favour from him, never the slightest intimation that he might hope to inherit as much as a mourning ring ; and he certainly did not look for it. The Squire had other relatives, as near—or, rather, as distant—as he ; but none expected to be the better for him. As to George Arde's own prospects, he intended to put by a little money every good hop year, buy more yards, and so get rich that way. We all have schemes in the head for making ourselves wealthy in course of time.

Mrs. Arde sat by the fire, a baby of some four months old sleeping in her arms. It was very precious to the mother, this little thing ; and they had named it by her own name, Mary. Fragile, delicate, attenuated, but exquisitely beautiful, was Mrs. Arde. There seemed to be no strength in her, no life-blood. A flush would appear on her cheeks towards the close of the afternoon ; but at other times her face was pale as alabaster : you might see the blue veins underneath the clear skin. George Arde feared the paleness less than he did the flush : for the latter looked suspiciously like hectic. There were moments when a horrible prevision came over him—that he should lose her : but he strove to drive the fear away, even from his own heart ; and he never spoke of it. Maria Owen had been staying with her sister for several weeks now. Mr. and Mrs. Owen willingly spared her : they also had secret fears about Mary's health. But now that Mrs. Arde seemed to be getting somewhat stronger—as in truth she did so seem—Maria was to go home : and it had been settled that her father should take her back with him when he came in to market on the following Saturday.

And that, Maria's sojourn in the house,

accounted for the frequent presence in it of Geoffry Clanwaring. Hardly a day passed but upon some pretext or other Mr. Geoffry paid a visit to Worcester. Sir Dene, utterly unsuspicious, told him he was getting restlessly fond of riding. Not that Geoffry always rode in : he walked often. Just now Sir Dene, who had recovered from the sprain to his ankle, was staying in London, and Geoffry was entirely his own master in regard to his movements, accountable to nobody. He had walked in this afternoon : and he now had to walk back again. Earlier than usual, he intended to go : but he had business at home that night with Jonathan Drew.

"And you really cannot stay for tea?" asked Mrs. Arde, as he shook hands with her to leave.

"Not this evening, thank you. I wish I could. Good-night, Arde."

"Good-night, Geoffry."

"I wish you would just come as far as the gate with me, Maria. I have something to say to you."

Geoffry Clanwaring turned his head to ask this as he was quitting the room. Maria blushed painfully, and hesitated—hesitated

because of the presence of the others. But Geoffry held open the door, waiting for her, and she timidly followed him. That Mr. and Mrs. Arde were tacitly aware of the state of affairs between Sir Dene's son and Maria—namely, that he was courting her, as the phrase ran—could but be a matter of course ; otherwise they had possessed neither sense nor perception. They did not interfere. George Arde felt that all interference would be useless, for he remembered his own case : and it really was no concern of his, that he should make or mar. Mrs. Arde trembled a little : she saw insurmountable difficulties before them ; and once she spoke just a word of warning to her sister. “Papa can never give his consent, Maria. It would put him all wrong with Sir Dene.” Maria answered nothing : but the sadness that overspread her face showed to Mary Arde how perfectly she understood the hopelessness of the future ; and that Mr. Owen's consent was a thing never to be looked for. And so, Mr. and Mrs. Arde had gone on, tacitly sanctioning the state of matters, inasmuch as they did not put a stop to Geoffry's visits. He had found many a moment for seeing Maria alone ; for George Arde would be out and about, and

the delicate young mother had often to remain in her chamber. But this was the first time that Mr. Clanwaring had gone so far as to ask Maria to go out of the room with him.

"George," whispered the wife, as the room door closed, "I do feel that we are incurring a great responsibility in suffering this. Should it ever be discovered at home, papa will say so."

"How is it to be helped?" returned George Arde. "We can do nothing, either way. It's not to be expected, Polly, that I should go off to her father, or to his father, and tell about it!"

"Well—no. Of course not. At any rate, it will be over on Saturday," added Mrs. Arde with a sigh of relief. "The responsibility, I mean. Maria returns home then, and I shall be glad of it; much as I regret to lose her."

Meanwhile Maria, a light shawl thrown over her shoulders, that she had caught up in passing out, was pacing down the path on Mr. Clanwaring's arm. George Arde could see them through the window in the dusk. It was some such a night as the one already told of, when the two men with their burden

of plate had gone stealing up Harebell Lane : moonlight, but very gusty. A cold November evening.

“ Everything is arranged and in readiness, Maria,” began Geoffry. “ I saw the clergyman this afternoon, and I’ve got the license. Nine o’clock, mind. You will find me at the church waiting for you.”

For Mr. Geoffry Clanwaring had succeeded in obtaining Maria Owen’s consent to marry him. They meant to take French leave : get married quietly, and tell the world afterwards. Such weddings were rather common in those days ; and were regarded with less reprehension than they would be in these. To do Maria justice, she had at first steadily refused : but Geoffry had eloquently pointed out that there was no middle course ; nothing between that, and separation. And, to separate, was beyond the philosophy of either.

“ I cannot possibly see how I shall get away from here in my white dress,” she answered. “ The season is too far advanced for wearing white in a morning now. If they saw me, they might suspect something.”

“ Put on a big shawl,” suggested Geoffry.

"Or come in a coloured dress : what does it matter?"

At the foot of the little garden there ran a sheltered walk behind the hedge, secure from observation. Geoffry turned into it.

"I want to try on the ring, love."

He had bought it that afternoon at the silversmith's. The same one from whom the gold and silver plate had been stolen : which robbery, as to its perpetrators, had never been discovered, in spite of the cunning of the Bow Street runners. Mr. Geoffry found he had guessed the size well : the friendly night hid the blushes on Maria's sweet face, as he told her so.

"Oh but, Geoffry, I scarcely dare to think of it!" she said imploringly. "I tremble for the consequences. And besides, it is *not* a right thing for us to do."

"It is quite right, my love. It can injure no one. When once my father knows you, and finds that we are happy, he will forgive all. And you are aware that Mr. Owen would give you to me himself, so far as I am alone concerned."

"I have never disobeyed my father and mother before," she said, bursting into tears.

Geoffry Clanwaring kissed the tears away.

The gentle, lovely face, very sad then, lay passively against him, and he took kiss after kiss from it, as he whisperingly strove to reassure her with all the eloquence love is master of. And thus they parted—for the last time before their wedding-day.

The church of St. Peter's was open in the morning. A damp old church in the region of Frog Lane, that you stepped down into as if into a vault. The clergyman was in the vestry ; the clerk fidgeted about the pews. Geoffry Clanwaring, in bridegroom's attire, stood looking anxiously from the door.

A panting, breathless girl came in. A most lovely, dimpled, timid, shrinking girl, who took off her red gipsy cloak as she entered, which had served partially to cover her. Her wedding dress was of white sprigged India muslin — the material had been a present to her years ago from her godmother—and a straw hat trimmed with a wreath of pale blush roses.

“God bless you, my darling !” cried Geoffry, seizing upon her. “It is seven minutes past nine, and I was all upon thorns.”

“I was so afraid,” she whispered. “I did not dare come out of my room for fear of any one's meeting me on the stairs.”

"I shall want you to stand father-in-church to this young lady," said Geoffrey to the clerk, slipping a very substantial fee into that functionary's hand.

"At your pleasure, sir."

The clergyman came out in his surplice, and took his place. The clerk directed them where to kneel ; standing himself at Maria's elbow. There was no bridesmaid ; the clerk was to be "father-in-church" and give the bride away. It has been remarked that such weddings, unattended, were tolerably common then : and the clergyman made no fuss about this one. He saw that the license was in order, asked a question or two, and proceeded with his work.

Rarely has a handsomer couple knelt before the altar, never one more attractive. He, tall and strong, with his fair Saxon beauty, his kindly blue eyes, his golden hair ; she in her gentle shrinking, blushing loveliness. The clergyman pronounced them man and wife, and gave the bridegroom, at his own request, a certificate.

The weather had culminated into a downfall of rain when they got out again. It had been a dull, grey, threatening morning, and now the rain had commenced. Not very hard,

as yet. Maria took her white India muslin up under her cloak, and tripped along on Geoffry's arm. Thanks to the umbrella—which he had had the precaution to bring from home—and the rainy streets, they got into Mr. Arde's without observation.

In consequence of Mrs. Arde's delicate state, and perhaps also of the exactions of the baby, breakfast there had recently been taken very late, more especially when she attempted to come down to it—as she had this morning. The tea was only being made; and Maria's escapade had not been discovered: it was supposed she had not yet come out of her chamber. Geoffry went in first, in his light overcoat.

"Why, Geoffry!" exclaimed George Arde with intense surprise. "You are in town early!"

Geoffry threw his coat back, and they saw his costume—a gala one. Quite at the first moment, no suspicion as to the *why*, was aroused. George Arde, as he stared, thought there might be some grand breakfast in the town, that Mr. Clanwaring had come in for.

"Is anything going on in Worcester to-day, Geoffry?"

"Not that I know of. I have been getting married."

He turned to the door, and brought Maria in, scarlet cloak and all. Mr. Arde looked from one to the other; his wife sunk into a chair, bewildered.

"Oh, Maria!" she gasped.

Maria flew to her, and hid her face on her bosom in a passion of hysterical tears. They could not soothe her: emotion, suppressed hitherto, had its way now.

"Oh, Mary! forgive me!" came the sobbing cry.

Geoffry tenderly took off the hat and cloak, and stroked the hand with its new wedding ring fondly within his own. Mrs. Arde was pale as death.

"You—are—surely—not really married!" she exclaimed.

"Here's the certificate," said Geoffry, handing it to Mr. Arde. "It's all in form. We were married at your parish church—St. Peter's."

"Well, you are a clever fellow!" cried Mr. Arde, half admiringly, half angrily.

"And my father and mother!—oh, what a blow it will be to them!" bewailed Mrs. Arde, weeping with Maria.

"I hope not," answered Geoffry. "They both like me."

"Who is to break it to them?"

"I; of course. I shall go over there to-day or to-morrow for the purpose. You won't refuse to give us some breakfast, will you, Arde?"

Mr. Arde, getting a little over his annoyance—for he had felt at first both dismayed and angry—told him that as much breakfast was at their service as they liked to eat. Just as he had been neuter in the matter hitherto, so he resolved, after taking a minute's inward counsel with himself, to remain. The marriage had certainly been no fault of his: none could be more surprised at it than he was; and therefore no blame could attach to him. He did not see why he should either espouse their cause, or turn against them for it: and he determined to do neither.

"It is your own concern entirely, Geoffry; I shall not make it mine. I am sorry that you have taken this step—and there's sure to be a row over it: but I don't see that *I* am called upon to resent it. And so—here's good luck to you both."

"Thank you heartily," replied Geoffry: while Maria sobbed in silence.

"But, do not think I approve of what you have done—don't run away with that notion to tell your friends," resumed Mr. Arde.
"What are your plans?"

"Plans?" returned Geoffry.

"Ay. Where are you going to take Maria? Up to the moon?"

"Up to Malvern. I have engaged lodgings there for the present."

"Oh, I thought you might be going to take her to Beechhurst Dene," cried Mr. Arde rather satirically.

"I must wait for that."

But before sitting down to breakfast, Maria escaped to her chamber, unseen by either of the servants: there to remove the tell-tale attire and assume her ordinary dress. As to Geoffry, he breakfasted with his overcoat buttoned close up.

Surprises that day seemed to be the lot of Mr. and Mrs. Arde. The morning was wearing on, getting near the time that Geoffry intended to take his bride away—driving her in his open gig to avert any suspicion that a close carriage might have endangered—when Squire Arde called. The same little, stooping old man that you have already seen; in the same pepper-and-salt suit with the

silver buckles at his knees and shoes ; and the same fluffy great-coat falling off his narrow shoulders. He had never honoured them with a call yet : hence the surprise. Mrs. Arde blushed as she rose timidly to receive him. As to Maria, she felt ready to sink : in the first confused moment a wild fancy came over her that her father knew all about the morning's work, and that Squire Arde had come from him, the herald of war.

" What, are *you* here !" cried he, staring at Geoffry.

" I came into Worcester this morning, Squire," was the assumingly-careless answer.

" Oh," returned the Squire, glancing at Maria, as though he had some suspicion that she might be the attraction. " When d'ye expect Sir Dene home from Lunnon ?"

" In a week or two, I suppose ; it's uncertain," answered Geoffry.

Squire Arde's visit this morning was not dictated by any thought of friendship or courtesy : he had but come to inquire after the character of a man who had been employed upon George Arde's hop grounds.

" I don't know much of him, sir," was George's answer to the application. " He is

steady enough, I think. Jonathan Drew could tell you more about him than I can."

"Ah, I daresay," was the old man's remark. "But Drew might not speak the truth, you know."

"Drew not speak the truth!" interposed Geoffry Clanwaring. "He'd be sure to do that, Squire. Though surly in manner sometimes, he is truthful."

"When he finds it convenient to be so," returned the Squire with composure. "He did not speak truth for Tom Barber's widow."

"How do you mean, sir?"

"In the matter of that lost paper. Drew knew it was given to her, well enough, though it suited him to forget it."

"If I thought Drew did know of it—asserting all the while that he did not; that there had never been any such paper given—I would get my father to turn him away," was the indignant remark of Geoffry.

"Let him be," said the old man. "The matter's over, and done with, and Hester Barber's gone. A curious thing, she should ha' found the paper only an hour or two afore her death, warn't it?"

He looked at Geoffry with his once bright

grey eye, cold as steel. In the glance there was a strange keenness.

“Yes, it was curious,” assented Geoffry. “Had the paper been unearthed in time, I hope—and I think—my father would have respected it, and not interfered with the poor old woman; although it was not binding on him. I should have done my best to beg for her. I did as it was.”

“Well, it’s too late by some months now,” said the Squire: “the cottage is gone, and the fine new road’s there instead. It’s just one o’ them cases, young man, that might be compared to a broken egg. Once split on the floor, it can never be picked up again.”

“That’s true,” said Geoffry, a great sadness in his good-natured blue eyes. “Nobody was more sorry for poor Granny Barber than I was. It was a hard case: I told my father so. But he did not see it in the same light.”

Old Mr. Arde nodded, and then shook his head from side to side, as if in strong condemnation.

“You think my father did wrong, I see, sir.”

“Nay, I judge nobody, young man. But there’s some plain words in an old Book that have run through my head, off and on, since

the day I saw 'em demolishing her place.
'Remove not the old land-mark, and enter not into the field of the fatherless.' Sir Dene don't read his Bible, maybe."

"Oh but he does—sometimes," said Geoffry.

"Ah then he forgot 'em, maybe ! Any-way the old homestead's gone, and Hester Barber's gone ; and the cutting's broad and smooth, and a fine name you've given to it—Dene Hollow."

"We did not give it ; I don't know who did give it, sir."

"And it don't matter who," rejoined the Squire.

At that moment a young servant-maid came in with the baby. When she saw there was a stranger present, she would have retreated ; but Mrs. Arde took the child from her. A very pretty, lively little baby in a clean white frock, who sat up and looked with independence on the company. The child attracted Squire Arde's attention, and he went up and patted its cheek.

"Boy, or girl, ma'am ?"

"Girl, sir," replied Mrs. Arde.

"Ho ho, pretty one ; ho ho ! What, are ye laughing at the old man ? D'ye want to come to him ?"

For the baby had broken out into a smile, and was holding forth its little fat arms. To the surprise of all present, perhaps also of himself, Squire Arde put his riding-whip on the table, and took the baby.

“What’s her name?” he asked, as he sat down, and the little fingers caught hold of his hanging bunch of seals.

“It’s Mary, sir.”

“Mary! The same as my girl’s was,” muttered he, his voice dying away in a whisper. And he kissed the child fondly.

“Here, take it, ma’am; I must be going,” said he, getting up. “You don’t look very peart, my dear,” he added, in a kind, fatherly tone, as Mrs. Arde received the child, and he chuckled her under the chin. “You should try and get your wife’s roses back, George Arde. Good-day to ye all.”

They watched him down the path in the rain, the little shrunken figure, riding-whip in hand, George Arde attending him to open the gate.

Squire Arde’s had been a sad history. In the bloom of his early manhood, when life looked fair before him, he had married a young lady to whom he was much attached. She gave birth to a child—a girl—and soon

afterwards symptoms of insanity developed themselves. Ever since then until her death, which only occurred three years ago, she had been the raving inmate of a lunatic asylum. The little girl lived to be ten years old : and her death nearly broke her father's heart. Since then he had been strangely altered : the kindly feelings of his nature seemed to have withered up at the grave, and he became a solitary, penurious old man. Hurst Leet was wont to say that he was Arde by name, and hard by nature. But this was mostly applied to his sociable qualities ; for no one instance of oppression had ever been traced to him.

"How's hops, George?" he asked, as he was going through the gate.

"Pretty brisk, sir. Nothing much to complain of."

"I think I shall try that fellow. Good morning."

On the following afternoon Geoffry Clancwaring, leaving his wife at Malvern, went over to Harebell Farm to break the news of what he had done. Nothing, as he believed, had transpired ; he took it for granted that the marriage was as yet a secret. Mr. Owen

happened to be in his barn when Geoffry rode in. Leaving his horse, Geoffry found him watching the threshing. Drawing the farmer outside, for the noise was deafening, Geoffry sat down on the shaft of a barrow, and told him what he had to tell.

“I know all about it, Mr. Clanwaring.”

“Know it!” repeated Geoffry, starting up. But it might have struck him that the farmer listened very quietly, without any appearance of surprise. “Why, how did you get to know it, sir?”

“From my daughter Mary. I took the pony-chaise into Worcester early this morning to fetch home Maria, her mother not being well. It could not be kept from me then.”

A deprecating flush rose to the young man’s ingenuous face. He held out his hand timidly.

“You will not refuse to forgive me, sir! And—to—bless us both?”

“My forgiveness will not be a material matter to you, Mr. Clanwaring,” was the reply—and Geoffry could but note with what strangely calm sadness he was speaking. “Your father’s will be of more moment than mine: and that, I fear, you will never get. I cannot forgive Maria.”

"Oh, but she was not to blame; it was not her fault," ardently burst forth Geoffry. "She only yielded to me after months of persuasion."

"There lies her fault—that she did yield," spoke the farmer gravely. "I had thought that I could place implicit trust in my daughters."

"She will be your dutiful daughter still, Mr. Owen, and her mother's too, although she is my wife. I'll bring her over to see you next week."

"Do you fancy you were justified in taking this extreme step, sir?"

"Not entirely," candidly avowed Geoffry; "but *yes* in a very great degree. The only one to whom I cannot plead justification is my own father. To you and Mrs. Owen I may, and do, plead it. Had you not told me, sir, that you liked me for myself; that you would, had circumstances only been favourable, have willingly given me Maria?"

Robert Owen drew in his refined and beautiful lips. It was true, so far.

"But the circumstances were not favourable, Mr. Clanwaring. You know perfectly well that I alluded to your father. *Only* in

the event of his being willing should I have been."

" You see I was obliged to marry her as I have done," confessed Geoffry. " Had I asked my father's consent, he would have forbidden it altogether—and in the teeth of an absolute refusal I should not have liked to disobey him. As it is, nobody forbid it; and I have but taken my own way."

" I should call that three parts sophistry, sir."

" And one part good wholesome honesty," returned Geoffry, his earnest eyes full of sincere meaning. " Believe me, Mr. Owen, it will all come right. Sir Dene will be angry at first, little doubt of it; but he'll not retain anger long. I wrote to him last night, a good long letter, telling him all about it from the onset, and sent it off to-day. He'll get it tomorrow morning."

" And a fine way he'll be in," remarked the farmer. " His first act will be to give me notice of ejectment."

" How can you think he would be so unjust?" retorted Geoffry. " I have told him that you knew no more of it than he did, and would have been just as much against it. He'll make common cause with you in abusing

me for a bit, I shouldn't wonder. *You* will forgive me, Mr. Owen?" — and once more the pleading eyes went out with the offered hand.

"In one sense I forgive you, Mr. Clancwaring,—and that is, that I do not refuse my countenance to you now. The marriage cannot be undone; therefore it would serve no good end to resent it. It is not against me that you have sinned, but against your father and family."

"Thank you," said Geoffry, heartily, as his hand was at length taken. "And now, sir, I want you to hear me say that your daughter is very dear to me. By Heaven's help, I will do my best and utmost to promote her happiness."

Mr. Owen shook his head in sadness. "You think so now; I do not doubt it; but in these unequal marriages the wife generally has to suffer from neglect in the long run."

"Mine never shall," emphatically spoke Geoffry, his whole face burning red with resentment at the implied suggestion. "If I know anything of myself, Mr. Owen, of my nature, my principles, my *love*, Maria will be as dear to me and as honoured by me in

the far-off years to come, as she is on this, the morrow of my wedding day."

In the far-off years to come! Could poor Geoffry—could ill-fated Robert Owen—but have foreseen a shadow of the events that were destined to happen long before those far-off years should dawn! Astrologers have assumed to see into the future: but it is not one of the least mercies of God that all such sight is hidden from our view.

CHAPTER VII.

ENCOUNTERING THE STORM.

CLATTERING up through the gates of Beechhurst Dene in a noisy post-chaise and pair late at night, went Sir Dene Clanwaring and his eldest son. The chaise had been chartered from Sir Dene's hotel at Worcester, the Hop-pole, after the London stage coach had deposited them in that city. Geoffry's "good long letter" was not received so soon by two or three days as it might have been, in consequence of Sir Dene's temporary absence from London. It had now brought him down in a fury, and Mr. Clanwaring accompanied him to take part in the storm. He was a little, dark man, this eldest son and heir ; proud, honourable, haughtily self-conscious of his degree and position. As little like his father and Geoffry in person as he could well be ; resembling, in fact, his dead mother.

Bitterly wrathful, was he, against Geoffry for the (as he put it) degrading marriage : he said less than Sir Dene, but his anger was inwardly greater, and would be more lasting. Mr. Clanwaring intended to mate with one of high degree, himself ; the youngest brother, in India, Reginald, had married a title : how could they brook the disgrace on the family inflicted by Geoffry ? Mr. Clanwaring's private opinion was that he deserved hanging. As a matter of course he must be discarded for ever : blotted out of the Clanwaring archives.

The housekeeper came forward in dismay as the chaise stopped : she had received no intimation of Sir Dene's return, and had been about to retire for the night. Sir Dene waved her off ; said they did not want much supper ; anything would do ; but ordered a fire to be lighted instantly in his parlour, and Gander sent to him.

Gander was in bed. A faithful serving man some forty years old, who had spent the last half of them with his master in India, and was now butler. Gander had a frightful toothache—which he was always having—and had gone to bed at nine on the strength of it. He was a red-faced man with obstinate dark

hair that never could be persuaded by brush to lie on his head, but stood up in straight pieces like porcupines' quills, as if he were in a chronic state of fright! The popular phrase—his hair stood on end—might have been made for Gander.

"Now then, Gander," began Sir Dene as soon as he appeared, "what is the truth of this infamous business?"

Gander knew what was meant, and wished himself miles away: he was nearly as simple as his name. The offender, Mr. Geoffry, was a great favourite of his.

"Can't you speak?" cried Sir Dene.

"Well, Sir Dene—I—I suppose you have heard on't," stammered Gander, who was a native of Worcestershire, and spoke its patois.

"Is he really married?"

"Ay, sir, I b'lieve so."

"And to one of those girls of Owen's!"

"Yes, sir, it's she. The only one left of 'em. Squire Arde's nephew married the 'tother."

"Squire Arde's nephew?" Gander had thrown in that in his good nature; a reminder that his young master was not the first gentleman by birth who had gone to Farmer Owen's for a wife.

"Has he been here since?" thundered Sir Dene.

"Mr. Geoffry?—no, sir. We hear he's a staying at Malvern."

John the heir turned round: he was holding his boots, first one, then the other, to the faggots in the grate, now blazing up.

"Is it known yet in the neighbourhood, Gander?"

"Lawk, Mr. Clanwaring! Known! Why, sir, it's the talk o' the whole place—and has been since the day after the wedding, when Mr. Geoffry came over to beg forgiveness of Farmer Owen——!"

"Forgiveness of *him*!" interjected Mr. Clanwaring, with curling lips.

Gander detected the passion. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Clanwaring," he resumed with deprecation. "It's said he did do it. Farmer Owen is as grieved about it as anybody else can be. He told Squire Arde that 'twas just a blow to him."

"Does he consider Mr. Geoffry Clanwaring beneath his daughter?" questioned the heir in scornful mockery.

"It is because he is so much above her, sir, and because he knows it'll put Mr. Geoffry wrong with Sir Dene—that's why *he* feels it as a blow," cried honest Gander.

"Cease this, John," stormed the baronet, bringing his hand down on the table by which he stood. "What I want to know is, how he got acquainted with the girl. They would not be married off-hand without some acquaintanceship. *Somebody* must have known that there were meetings between them."

"As to that, Geoffry was always out and about like a bailiff," spoke Mr. Clanwaring, while Gander was wisely silent.

"He had his work to do, John. Over-looking, and that."

"Yes, sir. I imagine, though, that Harebell Farm was better looked after than all the rest of the land put together."

"Harebell Farm is not in my occupation; he had no business there, at all," growled Sir Dene. And his son gave a stamp to the burning wood with his right boot.

"The young lady has not been at home these five weeks past, Sir Dene—leastways, it's said so," added cautious Gander, not deeming it expedient to know too much. "The tale runs that she has been a staying at Worcester with her sister, Mrs. Arde."

A sudden flash of enlightenment, like an illumination, darted through Sir Dene's brain. He turned on his heel.

“ Then that explains his visits to Worcester ! John, I thought he had gone Worcester-mad. He was always there.”

“ And no one could open their lips to tell Beechhurst Dene of it !” said John bitterly. “ Did you know nothing of it, Gander ?”

“ Not a word, Mr. Clanwaring. Of course, sir, I knowed it was as Sir Dene says—that Mr. Geoffry was often going to Worcester. But it never came into my head to wonder why he went.”

Sir Dene was biting his hot lips. “ Let’s see—which day was it that he made this shameful marriage, Gander ?”

“ ’Twas last Thursday, sir—a week ago tomorrow. I wondered what business could be taking off Mr. Geoffry so soon in the morning : his gig was waiting at the door a’most afore ’twas light. He had a cup o’ coffee took to his room, and came down with his top-coat on. ‘ If I am not at home by nine o’clock to-night, don’t expect me, Gander,’ says he. Upon that I asked whether he had got the key of the cellaret—for I had been looking for it, Sir Dene, and couldn’t find it. He unbuttoned his coat to feel in his pockets, and then I see he was dressed up.”

“ Saw he was dressed up !” echoed Sir Dene.

“And ought not that to have given you a suspicion of what was agate?”

“Why no, sir; how should it?” returned Gander.

“A man does not go out dressed up at dawn for nothing,” stormed the baronet.

“I thought it might be the mayor’s feast at Worcester, Sir Dene—if I thought anything: it’s held in November. But, sir,” added the man with reason, “put it that I had suspected the truth—what end would it ha’ served? I could not have stopped Mr. Geoffry from getting married—or attempted to stop him. He is my master, sir.”

“You are a fool, Gander,” growled Sir Dene.

To what use the discussion? Of what avail to dispute as to what might have been? It could not undo the fact of the marriage, or part Geoffry Clanwaring from the young girl he had made his wife.

On the following day, Thursday, Geoffry drove his wife over from Malvern to Harebell Farm. And there, happening to meet one of his father’s servants, he learnt the fact that Sir Dene had come thundering home in a storm of passion. Leaving Maria with her mother, he went at once to Beechhurst Dene.

There was a distressing and turbulent scene. Geoffry found more enemies than he had bargained for. Not only were his father and brother there : but his mother's sister, Miss Clewer, a precise maiden lady of more than middle age, had also arrived. The news of her favourite nephew's escapade had reached her at her home in Gloucestershire, and she posted over in a chaise and four in dire consternation.

Going in by the back way, Geoffry met Gander in the passage. The butler started back when he saw who it was ; and took the opportunity to whisper a word of warning.

“ They be all in the library, Mr. Geoffry,” he said ; “ a making a frightful outcry against you. The master, and Mr. Clanwaring, and Miss Ann Clewer—she’s come over, sir. I’ve just carried in a pitcher o’ water to keep her out of a fit of the ‘sterics.”

“ Great cry and little wool, Gander,” said Geoffry, with light good humour. But nevertheless he shrank from the task before him. He would not so much have minded Sir Dene alone ; but there was the wrath of his haughty brother in addition to be encountered ; not to speak of his aunt’s hysterics.

The room called the library was a charming

one. Not large, with a bay window opening on the side of the house opposite to that of the Harebell Lane entrance. It looked on the green park ; on its beautiful old trees scattered here and there ; on the herd of tame deer. It had been the favourite sitting-room of the late Lady Clanwaring, and was lightly and tastily furnished, the carpet bright with roses, the chairs and curtains of pale green brocade.

Geoffry opened the door quietly, and they did not see him. Sir Dene was pacing the floor in a fume ; John Clanwaring stood with his face to the window ; Miss Clewer (a very thin lady with a flaxen “front”) sat on a sofa, her bonnet and shawl on, just as she had got out of the post-chaise ; her eyes dropping tears.

“Sir Dene ! Father !”

They saw him then ; and a fine commotion set in. What Gander had called a frightful outcry became more frightful. Sir Dene raved, Ann Clewer sobbed ; John Clanwaring stared contemptuously in his brother’s face, his thin lips compressed, his arms folded. Geoffry stood his ground before them, hoping for a hearing ; upright, noble, his fair Saxon face quite remarkable in its beauty. He strove to make the best defence he could :

but it was not a moment calculated to enhance an offender's courage. Sir Dene interrupted him at every second word, utterly refusing to listen.

"Aunt Ann, will *you* hear me—will you let me tell you how sweet and gentle she is?" pleaded Geoffry. "She is as much a lady in mind, manners, and appearance as ever my dear mother was."

"Oh!" cried Miss Clewer with a shriek and a sob. "To bring your mother's name in with *hers*! The world must be coming to an end, I think. If my dear Lady Clanwaring could come out of her grave, she'd die again with the shame."

It was of no use. Not a word of reason could any one of them be brought to hear. Abuse drowned Geoffry's voice. Sir Dene ranted out hot things; Mr. Clanwaring quieter ones, that stung ten-fold deeper with their scorn; Miss Clewer sobbed and choked and shrieked. Geoffry managed to put his hand into his father's, as he whispered forth a plea to be forgiven.

Forgiven! Sir Dene flung away the hand with a passionate force that sent Geoffry staggering: and ordered him out of the house.

"Go," he thundered, his arm stretched out to indicate the door. "Get your living in the best way you can. I cast you off from this hour."

And Geoffry went. Finding that the longer he stayed the worse it got, he went. At the angle of the passage stood Gander, with a face as red as a turkey's comb.

"It has been a'most as bad as bull-baiting, hasn't it, Mr. Geoffry?" he whispered.

"There has been as much noise, Gander."

"Ay. But look here, sir—don't you be downhearted. Sir Dene's temper's up—and nobody knows better than me the lot of swearing it takes to cool it down again. One has to swear, living in India. Just let Mr. Clanwaring get away from the place—he is the hottest against you, sir, and it edges on Sir Dene. When he's safe off and the house is clear, you come again, Mr. Geoffry, and try then. I can tell you one thing, sir—your father likes you better than he does *him*."

Geoffry nodded. He knew all this just as well as Gander. While he was giving directions for his clothes to be sent to him, the library door opened, and Mr. Clanwaring came out.

" You will shake hands with me before I go, won't you, John ?" he asked when he had finished what he had to say to Gander—and the tone was a somewhat piteous one.

But Mr. John Clanwaring rejected the held-out hand quite as unmistakeably though less demonstratively than Sir Dene had done : and passed on, leaving a few cold and cutting words behind him.

So Geoffry went out of his father's home by the nearest and least ceremonious way. As he crossed Harebell Lane, he saw Robert Owen leaning on his gate.

" Well, how have you sped ?" were the words that greeted him.

" Badly to-day," was the young man's candid answer. " It was to be expected I should, this first time. Things will come all right later, Mr. Owen—at least with my father. I am sure of it."

" Is Sir Dene very much incensed ?" questioned Mr. Owen.

" Yes. Old Aunt Ann has come posting over — to make matters worse : and my brother is at home, which is worse still. Between them all, I had not fair play. No play at all, in fact. It will be different—when I can get to see my father alone."

"And meanwhile, what are you to do for ways and means, Mr. Clanwaring?"

Geoffry smiled. "That need not concern me yet, sir: I am not reduced to my last ten-pound note. Never having had ill outlets for my allowance, as some young fellows have, I saved it."

Robert Owen shook his head. "The time may come when you will rue the day for your foolish marriage with Maria."

"It never will," said Geoffry with emphasis. "She is a great deal too precious to me for that to come to pass."

Mr. Owen sighed. Others had thought the same, and lived to find themselves bitterly mistaken. They were leaning with their arms on the gate while they talked.

"Did Sir Dene say anything about me, Mr. Clanwaring?"

"Not a word. Who's that?"

Geoffry Clanwaring's "Who's that" applied to a man who was passing down the lane. An ill-looking fellow with a slouching gait, and slouching hat.

"I don't know who it is," was Robert Owen's answer when the man was beyond hearing, "but I suspect it is one of Mr. Randy Black's choice customers. Had this

business of yours, sir, not come between me and Sir Dene, I might have found it my duty to give him a hint as to what I think of the Trailing Indian."

"Give it to me," said Geoffry.

"I have nothing very tangible to say. Only that I feel sure evil doings of some kind are carried on in the house. I am out a good deal late in an evening with my stock, and hardly a night passes by but I see ill-looking men slink up this lane on their way to the place. Sometimes they have bundles with them."

"Bundles!" cried Geoffry.

"Bundles that they try to hide. I'd not like to make an affidavit that they don't contain stolen goods."

"No!" uttered Geoffry in surprise. "Stolen goods! You mean smuggled goods, don't you?"

"I mean what I say, Mr. Clanwaring. I have had my strong suspicions for some time now, that the Trailing Indian is a receiving place for them."

"Oh but, you know my father would never allow anything of that kind on his estate," returned Geoffry, unconsciously drawing himself up with a touch of the haughty pride of

the Clanwaring family. "He would shut up the Trailing Indian to-morrow, and send Black to the right about."

"He would have to prove it first," dissented Robert Owen. "Black holds his lease, and cannot be turned out lightly. Put it down at smuggling only: it's not very reputable to have such a man for one's next-door neighbour."

"Black must be uncommonly bold if it is anything beyond smuggling. Do you think he'd venture on it?"

"There never was a safer place for it than the Trailing Indian has been," observed Mr. Owen. "Moses Black occupied this farm, and of course was in his brother's interests; Mr. Honeythorn kept but three or four servants at the Dene in his old age—and they mostly women. Why, a gang of smugglers, or what not, might have gone up this lane nightly, and not been met or seen once in a twelve-month! And you know how lonely the field way is across from Worcester!"

Geoffry Clanwaring took out his watch.
"What time do you dine, Mr. Owen?"

"I expect dinner's ready now, sir."

"Then I'll go up to the Trailing Indian after dinner, before we start for home. Mr.

Randy Black must get a hint, from me, to mind his manners."

"I should have given him a hint myself long ago, only that I possess no right to interfere," said Robert Owen. "You may tell him so if you like, Mr. Clanwaring."

When dinner was over (served in the best room, and in the best style that Harebell Farm could venture on—which was but a homely, comfortable style at the best—for this was the first time it had had the honour of entertaining Sir Dene's son) Geoffry started for the Trailing Indian. He took the short cut over the fields—not much above five minutes' walk that way—and leaped the little stile at the end of the Farm's grounds, which brought him out opposite the inn. Black was standing at his door, and watched the exit. He touched his hat to his landlord's son.

"I want to speak to you, Black. Will you walk about with me in the lane for a minute or two?"

"Won't you come in, sir?"

"No, I've not the time."

Pacing the lane before the house, beyond the chance of eaves-droppers, Geoffry Clanwaring gave the hint that he had come to give. He did not accuse Black outright of

unorthodox doings: only said that doubts had been aroused whether all things enacted at the Trailing Indian would bear the light of day. And he emphatically recommended Black to amend his ways, if they required amending—or he would hear more of it from Sir Dene.

“ Robert Owen has been putting you up to say this!” was Black’s first comment, spoken with suppressed fierceness.

“ No one has put me to say it—I come of my own accord. Though I may tell you, Black, that Mr. Owen has just the same opinion of the Trailing Indian that I have. He sees queer people stealing up here often enough at night.”

A change passed over Black’s evil face. It settled into a sneer.

“ Owen has taken a spite against me, Mr. Geoffry Clanwaring. I’ve knowed it long. My belief is, he wants to get me out of the Trailing Indian that he may have the place himself; that’s why he invents these lies.”

“ Don’t be absurd, man,” rebuked Geoffry.

Black said he was not absurd. He denied all insinuations, out and out, giving the Trailing Indian the very whitest of characters. It

was as honest as Harebell Farm, he said, and honester.

"That's enough, Black—I don't want to go further into it," concluded Geoffry. "My warning is a friendly one. If needed, you will do wisely to act upon it; if unneeded—why there's no harm done."

"It's a shame that people should try to take away my character behind my back!" exclaimed the landlord in a deeply injured tone. "There's not a ounce of bacca or a gill o' brandy comes into the Trailing Indian, but what has been through his Majesty's customs."

"As to smuggling, the popular belief is that the whole country smuggles when it gets the chance—from a duchess downwards," carelessly remarked Geoffry. "But," he added, dropping his voice, "to harbour stolen goods, or those who deal with them, is a very different thing, Black. Don't let the Trailing Indian be suspected of *that*. Good afternoon."

He vaulted over the stile at a run, leaving Black looking as dark as his name. Geach came sauntering forth from the inn door, behind which he had been peeping all the while.

“What’s up, Randy? You look fit to eat your grandmother.”

“If this is not the work of that confounded rat, call me false for ever!” cried Black, stamping with passion.

“What work? What rat?” naturally asked Geach.

“Robert Owen.”

CHAPTER VIII.

JONATHAN DREW'S MIDNIGHT RIDE.

AFROSTY night in December. The roads were hard ; the moon, bright as silver, was riding aloft in the sky. Mr. Jonathan Drew, Sir Dene's bailiff, who had been a day's journey on horseback, and was returning home across country weary and tired, turned off the turnpike road into Harebell Lane at its upper end ; as if he were a traveller going to demand hospitality of the Trailing Indian.

He was well buttoned up from the cold ; and had tied a handkerchief over his ears, which was surmounted by his high-crowned hat. The horse, weary as his master, sought the soft grass by the side of the lane, rather than the harder middle, on which some stones had recently been laid. Drew was feeling very cross. He had told his niece, who kept

his house and did for him, to have his supper ready by nine o'clock ; but his business had detained him longer than he had anticipated, and it was now past midnight. A very late hour, that, for a rural district : no travellers were supposed to be abroad at so unearthly a time.

The vague reports, none of them too good, connected with the Trailing Indian, caused Jonathan Drew to turn his eyes over his right shoulders on that hostelry as he was passing it. It lay on the opposite side of the lane to the one he was riding on. Closely shut up, it looked to be : the moon played on the casements, behind which the curtains were drawn ; its inmates no doubt being abed and asleep.

"As I ought to be," growled Mr. Drew. "Get on, Dobbin. What ails ye ?—ye bain't at home yet."

For the horse, finding his tired hoofs on the soft grass, had begun to take it easily, slackening his pace to a walk. Drew was about to urge him on with the spur, when a bright light, as if from a door suddenly opened at the side of the house, fell on the inn yard. Drew let Dobbin's nose seek the ground then, and sat still. He had halted close to the

stile that led into Mr. Owen's grounds—the same stile that Geoffry Clanwaring had leaped over when he went to speak that word of warning to the landlord of the Trailing Indian. The branches of the trees, thick there, were bare enough at this season, but the holly hedge was high ; it encompassed man and horse within its shade, and he could look across at leisure into Mr. Black's yard, on which the moonbeams shone freely, without fear of being observed.

Just for a short while, Drew, in spite of the moon's light and the other light, was slow in making out what there was to see. His sight was excellent still, except for close print ; it was not that : but there seemed to be some large, dark object, of indistinct form, drawn right across the yard. And when at length he slowly made out that, and other things, Jonathan Drew's head seemed to turn the wrong way upwards, and his life-blood to curdle within him.

It was a hearse. A black hearse with four plumes at its corners. The end of it was drawn up to the side door, whence the light issued ; and there seemed to be some figures moving. Four or five men : and they were bringing something out of the house ; some-

thing that the bailiff at length made out to be a coffin.

"Who can have died there?" softly ejaculated Drew in his bewilderment. "When I was at the place yesterday, I see Black, and the ostler, and—no, I didn't see *her*."

It flashed into his mind with the last words, that Black's wife had been very ill recently; Mr. Priar had been attending on her. Low fever, or something of that.

"It must be her that's in the coffin. Why didn't Black say yesterday she was dead?—And what on earth are they burying her for at this witching hour?"

But, as reason gradually replaced the first confused surprise, Drew remembered that they could not be taking out Mrs. Black at this hour to be buried, unless they were going to do it without "bell, book, and candle;" ay, and without priest also. Recalling Black's character, recalling the fact that he was popularly supposed not to stick at any dark deed, Jonathan Drew felt some ugly doubts creep over him: and he asked himself why they should be carrying away Mrs. Black's body in this surreptitious manner, unless it was to conceal her death. And, if Black did want to conceal it—what was the reason?

A sudden loud neigh from one of the two black horses harnessed to the hearse, caused Drew to start, and Dobbin to turn his head. Close upon that, the door of the vehicle was shut on what had been placed within it, and it began at once to make its way out of the yard.

Still as a statue, sat Drew: hoping, nay, almost praying, that no piercing eye might discern him, watching there. If—as he firmly believed—some ill deed was being enacted, it might not be safe for these desperate men to discover him. In the fear lest they should, he almost resolved to ride across boldly, ask whether Mrs. Black had died, offer his condolences in an unsuspecting manner; and then ride off at a gallop. But prudence told him it might be best to remain still. Concealed under the shade of the thick holly hedge, the chances were that he would not be seen.

On, the hearse came, slowly and quietly. One man sat beside the driver; both of them wearing black cloaks and hatbands. Turning out of the yard to the left, it thus traversed the short distance to the end of the lane: there it set off quickly along the high road, just in the direction that Mr. Drew had come. A high road that led, as may be said, all over the world, London included.

Drew, watching in utter stillness, heaved a sigh of relief. They had not seen him. Somebody—the ostler he thought, by the gait—came and shut the gate of the yard : after that, the side door was shut, and all was quiet. For any signs that remained of what had passed, a spectator might have thought it a dream.

Drew walked his horse quietly on the grass until he came to the corner of the lane, near Harebell Pond ; and then he rode away as if the deuce had been behind him. He could not get Black's wife and the coffin out of his mind. Drew was neither a timorous nor a superstitious man ; but the solitary lane struck him as being unpleasantly solitary to-night, and he was glad to get out of it.

Be you very sure that he would take the near way home : the fine new road, Dene Hollow. If ever Drew had felt special cause to congratulate himself on Sir Dene's having made that road, he did now. Turning off by the front gates of Beechhurst Dene, he gained it. A fine, smooth, beautiful road, lying white and cold in the moonlight. So bright was it, that the ghastly branches of the bare trees cast their shadows on it in places here and there as clearly as they did in the sunshine of day.

"Now I hope that wench, Pris, has kept my supper warm," muttered Drew, as his sure-footed horse began to descend. "She's a regular sawney, though, in some things. Shouldn't wonder but she——"

A start, a bound, a spring : and Jonathan Drew was thrown violently to the ground. The horse had started, as if in some great terror : had leaped from one side of the road to the other, across the foot-path, against the bank. It was like one who flies from some mortal enemy. Very nearly, if not quite in the same spot, it was, where the accident had occurred to Sir Dene Clanwaring : and the sudden spring of the horse had been like the spring made by Sir Dene's horses.

How long Jonathan Drew might have lain there undiscovered, but for one fortunate circumstance, it was impossible to say ; most probably until broad daylight. Mr. Priar came down the road, and found him. He, the surgeon, was returning home from a late visit to Harebell Farm. George Arde, his wife, and the baby had come there to spend a week or two and stay over Christmas : the child had been taken with convulsions in the afternoon ; and Mr. Priar had considered it in so much danger that he went up again to

the farm the last thing before bed-time, and remained till past midnight.

Drew lay insensible. The spurs on his boots and the riding whip at his side disclosed to the doctor the fact that he must have been thrown from his horse. He tried to rouse him, but could not; and feared there might be concussion of the brain. Getting assistance from the mill lower down—a rather difficult matter of accomplishment at that hour of the night—Drew was conveyed to his home.

It was not brain concussion; at least, to any serious extent; for Drew recovered his senses by the time he was at home, and his intellect seemed uninjured. What Mr. Priar began to fear now was concussion of the spine. Drew seemed powerless to move or stand; but he *said* he was not hurt, and talked away. Priscilla, his niece, said Dobbin had come galloping home with his coat in a sweat, all in a mortal fright.

"I can't think what ailed the brute," observed Drew to the doctor when they were alone. "He never served me such a trick afore."

"Dobbin was always so steady and sure-footed," rejoined Mr. Priar.

"He's sure-footed enough ; 'twarn't that," said Drew fractiously. "The fool took fright."

"What at?"

"Why at *nothing*," returned Drew. "Nothing that I could see. He wants a good hiding, and he'll get it to-morrow."

Mr. Priar privately thought Dobbin's master would not be so soon abroad to give him one. He let it pass, however.

"If the horse started, it must have been at something, Drew," observed the surgeon. "Perhaps a hare scudded across his path."

"There warn't no hare and there warn't no rabbit," retorted Drew; whose temper was certainly not improved by his mishap. "I tell ye, doctor, there warn't nothing. All around was just as still as still could be ; and the road was as bright as day."

Mr. Priar did not contradict again. He finished his examination of Drew, found that no bones were broken, and was imparting that cheering news, when the patient ungratefully interrupted him.

"Bother bones ! As if mine was young and brittle, that they should snap at a shoot off a horse. I say, Dr. Priar, what was the matter with Black's wife, up at the Trailing Indian ?"

"She has had low fever."

"When did she die?"

"Die!" repeated the doctor in surprise.

"Mrs. Black's not dead. She is better."

"Is she, though," complacently returned Drew, as if it afforded him pleasure to contradict for contradiction's sake—as in fact it did.

"When did you see her last, sir?"

"Two or three days ago," was the answer. "She is tolerably well now, and I took my leave of her."

"Well then, I can tell you, doctor, that she is *dead*."

Looking up into Mr. Priar's face from the mattress on which he was lying, Drew related what he had seen that night. It sounded so strangely mysterious altogether, that Mr. Priar at first thought his patient must be wandering. But Drew repeated the story minutely, and the notion passed away.

"Surely it cannot be Mrs. Black who has died?" exclaimed the doctor, feeling, himself, a disagreeable thrill.

"It can't be nobody else," disputed Drew. "When I was up there yesterday, they'd got no strangers in the house at all: Black was a grumbling that not a soul had put up there for a week or two."

"No," said Mr. Priar mechanically, his thoughts very deep just then; "the house has been empty of guests lately."

"Well, then—you can add up, doctor, can't you? Black was there, and the ostler was there; I saw 'em both: Mrs. Black I didn't see nor hear. Now, Mr. Priar, what I'd like to ask is this—whether there was anything wrong about the woman's death. Else why should Black conceal it, and smuggle her out o' the place at midnight?"

"I don't like the look of it," said Mr. Priar, after a pause. "The woman was in no danger of death when I took my leave of her. Even if she had had a relapse—which I don't think was at all likely to happen—it could not have killed her so soon as this."

"I think it ought to be looked into," said Drew. "Black has the credit of being capable of acts as black as his name. There was that talk o' the travelling pedlar, you know—seen to go into the inn, but never seen to come out on't again—that has never been cleared up."

"I shall look into this," replied Mr. Priar with decision. "If the woman is dead, Black must render an account of how she died. I'll go up there in the morning."

Drew laid his hand on Mr. Priar's arm.

"Doctor, don't you bring in my name to Black ; don't say 'twas me that watched 'em," he urged, some instinct prompting him to ask it. "Randy Black shan't be coming here to abuse me while I be helpless : he'd have it all his own way. Let me get about again, and I'll soon tell him what I saw—and ask the reason on't."

Mr. Priar nodded an unhesitating acquiescence to the request. Not only to oblige Drew, but also in the sanitary interests of that gentleman. He strongly suspected that poor Drew would soon be in a condition to render "abuse" from Black, or any one else, dangerously excitable. He was just as unpleasantly impressed with this strange account of the midnight doings at the Trailing Indian as Drew had been ; and took his leave.

In the course of the following morning Mr. Priar went up to the inn. He saw his patients first ; including Drew and Mrs. Arde's baby. Drew appeared to be in just the same state, there was no material alteration ; the child was very much better. Indeed it seemed well—after the elastic habits of babies. From Harebell Farm, the doctor went straight to the Trailing Indian, taking the near cut through the fields. As he crossed the stile

between the high holly hedge, he thought of what Drew had said—that it was close by that spot where he and Dobbin had halted the previous night. When Black, peeping forth from within his stable door, saw the doctor cross it, he knew that he had come from Harebell Farm. The fact that he had been summoned the previous day to George Arde's little child was no news at the inn.

The Trailing Indian presented its customary still and silent features. Nobody was about that the doctor could see. He went over, his mind full of the dead woman. Stepping in at the front door—which would make a show of keeping itself open for a few hours in the daytime—Mr. Priar passed on to the kitchen: and the first object his eyes alighted on was Black's wife. Black's wife, with a bucket in her hand. No wonder, considering what his thoughts had been running on, that the sudden apparition startled him more than if he had seen her dead.

“Bless my heart!” he exclaimed, in the fulness of his astonishment. “Why, Mrs. Black, I—I—had reason to fear that something had happened to you.”

“I'm getting a good deal better and stronger, thank you, sir,” she said, lodging

the bucket of water on the edge of a small tub. "What did you fear had happened to me, sir?"

"Why I thought that you—had died, in fact; or something of the sort. Who is it that has died here?"

"That has died here!" gasped Mrs. Black, suddenly struck into timidity—but her manner was timid at the bravest of times. "Nobody has died here, sir."

"Oh yes they have," said the doctor, thinking it best to speak out, now he was in for it. "And was taken away in a coffin and hearse last night at midnight."

Mrs. Black's answer to this—if answer it might be called—was to let fall the water and bucket into the tub, and to sink, herself, down on the nearest chair. The doctor had rarely in his life seen a picture of fear such as this. She shook from head to foot; her face and lips turned ghastly, sad to look upon. Mr. Priar began to feel sorry to have entered on the subject with her: but in truth it had escaped him in his utter astonishment.

"What's all this row?"

The interruption came from Black; who—to judge by his badly-suppressed savage aspect and white looks, nearly as white as

his wife's—must have heard. The woman started from her chair and escaped, leaving him to deal with it.

Through thick and thin Black swore that nothing of the kind, as described by Mr. Priar, had taken place. That the only foundation for it lay in this :—About ten o'clock the previous night, just as he and his wife were going up to bed, a hearse drove into the yard : the two men accompanying it wanted to bait their horses and to take some refreshment themselves. At twelve o'clock, both men and horses being refreshed, they drove away again. Black was ready to take his oath to this before any justice of the peace ; as being all he knew about the matter. He had asked the men, he said, who it was they had got, and they answered that it was a lady who had died away from her home and was being taken to it across the country for burial.

Now perhaps Mr. Priar might have believed this ; might have concluded that Jonathan Drew's eyesight had not seen so much as it had fancied, but for the consciousness and terror displayed by Mrs. Black. What the mystery was, what the crime, he did not attempt to guess at : but it must be something.

"Do you mean to say, Black, that the coffin was not taken out of your house at this very side-door, opposite to me as I sit, and put into the hearse?"

"That it never was," foamed Black.

"Look here, Black. I don't pretend to fathom the mystery of this. My information is correct, I believe: the person who witnessed this has good eyesight. He saw the yard-door open, he saw the coffin brought out of it by three or four men at least, and put into the hearse. It was as light as day. You say the coffin was not taken out of the hearse at all, or I could have understood that it was merely being put back again."

Black's positive oath, taken in his first heat—that the coffin had never been removed from the hearse—began to burn his lips. He thought what a fool he had been.

"They didn't take it out that I saw," he growled. "Why should they? Where was the man standing—that you say watched all this mummary?"

"Over the way; by the stile."

Black threw back his head as if he had expected the answer. "Who was it, Mr. Priar?"

"I am not at liberty to tell you. It is of no consequence who it was."

Black laughed an evil laugh. He thought he knew better than Mr. Priar could tell him. Who was likely to be about at that time of night, and at that spot, the stile, but Robert Owen? With his own eyes, he had seen Owen leaning over it at night, as if watching his house, more times than one.

"He is a cursed sneak, whoever it was, to come out to spy at a neighbour's castle in the dark, Mr. Priar."

"He did not come out to do anything of the kind. What he saw he saw accidentally."

"Saw accidentally!" retorted Black, curling his lip in scornful disbelief.

"I assure you, Black, it was so. He happened to be passing. But that has nothing to do with the point in question. I must tell you candidly I think there is more in this matter than you would like me to believe."

"Any way, that's all I know about it," was Black's stolid answer. "If your friend wants better information, Mr. Priar, he must go after the hearse, and seek it out for himself. Where was it now the men said they were bound to?—Somersetshire, I think.

Here, Joe ; come in," he called out, as the ostler passed the side-door. And the man came.

" Tell the doctor all about that there hearse that was at the inn last night," continued Black. " He has come up with a confounded story that the Trailing Indian sent away a coffin in it."

Joe, a short, powerfully-built man, with ragged flaxen hair and a swinging gait, as if he might sometime have been a sailor, looked stolidly from one to the other.

" I dun' know nothing o' the hearse, save that it stopped here to bait," said he.

" What time did it come ?—and what time did it go away ?—and who was with it ?—why don't you speak ?" cried his master, stamping his foot impatiently.

" It come in about ten—as near as I can tell ; and it stopped a good two hours. The horses had a feed o' corn ; and the two men had some'at to eat and drink in here ; I dun' know what ; the missus do ; she served 'em. They'd got a lady in the hearse, the driver telled me, and was a carrying of her to her own family's place for bur'al."

Either master and man were telling truth, or else they had conned their tale by heart.

Which of the two it was, Mr. Priar could not quite decide, in spite of his suspicions. But, as Mrs. Black had assuredly not been carried away in the hearse, and it might have been simply as Black stated, the doctor did not consider that he was called upon to investigate the matter further. Intimating as much to Black, who did not appear to receive it with any gratitude, he took his departure.

“ What did all that there mean?—and why was I called upon to speak ?” demanded the ostler then, of his master.

“ Well, we got watched last night, Joe ; that’s all. The load was seen to come out o’ here, and watched into the hearse.”

Joe said a word that he might have been fined for. And another ; and another.

“ *Watched ! Who by, master ?*”

Randy Black extended his hand and pointed in the direction of the stile over the way. And Mr. Joe broke out into several ugly words in succession, joining them with the name of Robert Owen.

Could Mr. Priar but have known the ill he unconsciously worked that day to the innocent master of Harebell Farm !

One of the first visitors to Mr. Jonathan

Drew's bedside was Mary Barber. Going down to Hurst Leet for some yeast the morning after the accident, she heard the news: Drew had been thrown from his horse in the night, and was supposed to be seriously injured. "I'll call in and see him," thought she. "He served mother that ill trick—pretending to know nought o' the paper gave by Squire Honeythorn—but we be kind o' relations, after all; and I'll go in." Accordingly, just about the time that Mr. Priar was at the Trailing Indian, Mary Barber was with the injured bailiff.

"Where be you hurt, Drew?" she asked, setting down her jug.

"I can't say where I be hurt," retorted Drew, who was in a fractious humour. "I don't feel to be hurt nowhere much—but I've got no more power to stand nor a child. Drat it all! I ought to ha' been at Leigh-Sinton to-day, about some stock. Drat that beast of a Dobbin! and double drat him!"

"How came the beast to throw you?" was Mary Barber's next question.

Drew told her, just as he had told others, that he did not know how it was, or why it was. He described the sudden start and spring, the evident terror that had assailed

the horse, all for no apparent cause. Mary Barber listened in silence, her mind busy.

“Drew,” said she, “it must have been the Shadow that frightened him.”

“You are a fool,” returned Drew.

“You called me that before, Drew, when I told you what mother said about the Shadow on the Hollow.”

“The old woman was dreaming when she said it,” returned Drew.

“She was dying; not dreaming. And, Drew, them dying people sometimes get a curiously-clear insight into things. What the Shadow she saw might be, I don’t know no more than you. But I be sure she did see it: and I think it stands to reason it was that, and nought else, that startled Sir Dene’s horses. I should say the same thing startled Dobbin.”

“Why don’t you say as pigs fly?” roared Drew.

“Because pigs don’t fly,” was the matter-of-fact answer. “Anyway, Drew, putting what mother said out of the question, Dene Hollow don’t seem to be a lucky road. If it never should be, one ought not to wonder. It was cut out of oppression; it was formed out of a poor old woman’s sobs and cries; it

broke her heart, and took her life away afore its time. And God's blessing, perhaps, 'll not lie upon such work as that."

"Granny Barber was a'most eighty. There warn't no reason in a mummy, got to that age, a standing in the light of other folks."

"Come, you be civil, Drew, toward a body that's dead," advised Mary Barber. "Being come to that age, there was all the more reason why Sir Dene and you should have let her alone. She couldn't be expected, in the nature o' things, to live much longer. I told Sir Dene so. If she'd been only a middle-aged woman, it might ha' been right to ask her to go out. Or, let's say, not so cruel."

"It's a fine, grand, level road ; there ain't a better in the county," shrieked Drew, going beside the question. "I dun' know what ye would have."

"Any way, it don't seem to carry travellers down it in safety," retorted Mary Barber, who never failed to try for the last word. And Drew, recalled to the thought of his own mishap and present bed-ridden condition, turned his eyes away with a resentful grunt.

"I don't wish to speak a word to hurt you, Drew, now that you be lying here, but I can't help saying that if you had honestly told Sir

Dene mother had that paper from Mr. Honeythorn—for you knowed it just as well as she did—the road might never have been made, and this might not have happened.”

“ You are a great stupe !” raved Drew.

“ Well, I must be going,” she said, catching up the jug from the floor, where she had put it to stand, “for they be waiting at home for this barm. And I wish ye well through, Jonathan ; and I'll look in again upon ye.”

Hurrying away, jug in hand, amidst the trees by which the house was surrounded, she encountered Squire Arde, who was coming to ask particulars of Drew's mishap. Mary Barber stayed to give them to him, winding up the narration with Priscilla's account of the horse “tearing home in a lather o' foam.”

“ Drew says he don't know what frightened the horse ; Sir Dene didn't know what frightened his horses ; and perhaps it don't much matter what it was,” she resumed. “ But I'm afeard o' one thing, sir—that that new road is not going to be a lucky road. I've just said so to Drew.”

“ Seems not to ha' been over lucky yet, Mary girl,” returned Squire Arde.

Mary girl ! This hard-looking, middle-aged woman seemed but as a girl to the old

man. He had had her on his knee when she was an infant.

"Drew, he goes on about its being a beautiful fine road : and so it is," said Mary Barber. "But, ye see, Squire, 'twas made out o' my poor mother's sobs and tears : and that's not a good legacy."

"I never liked that business," remarked Squire Arde, shaking his head. "'Twas no concern o' mine ; but I'd not ha' done it had I been Sir Dene. 'Taint well to remove your neighbour's landmark."

"It's a odd thing, sir, come to think on't, that them two should fall to ill on the road : Sir Dene and Drew."

"Ay," said the Squire absently. "How's that baby, up at your place ?"

"It's all right again now, sir. 'Twas her teeth. Many babies gets a fit o' convulsions in cutting their teeth. A fine little child, it is ; as pretty as its mother."

"So 'tis. How's she ?"

"She ? Well, I'd not like to be a croaker, Squire Arde, but I'm afraid we shan't have her long among us. Mr. George, he sees it too, I think. She seems to be wasting away as poor young Tom wasted."

"Tom ! Who's Tom ?" asked Squire Arde.

“Tom Owen. He was the youngest of 'em, sir ; a beautiful young lad, as well-looking as his father. He died in the old place, at Hallow, afore we come to live here.”

“Well, it's a nice baby ; 'twould be a pity for it to be left motherless,” concluded the Squire, as he went on to Drew's house.

CHAPTER IX.

SIR DENE'S PERPLEXITY.

SIR DENE CLANWARING sat in his bow-windowed parlour at Beechhurst Dene. He seemed very busy and very restless. The table was strewed with papers and parchments ; the upright secrétaire—or, as Sir Dene called it, secretary—standing against the wall opposite the window, was open. It seemed that Sir Dene did nothing but make pilgrimages from the papers on the table to the papers pushing out of the drawers and pigeon-holes of this piece of furniture. Altogether, the papers seemed to be somewhat confused : but, in truth, they were not half as much so as was Sir Dene himself.

The days had gone on ; Christmas was turned ; from a fortnight to three weeks had elapsed since the accident to Jonathan Drew. And Mr. Drew's injuries had turned out to be

of a very serious character. After the first day or two of uncertainty, fresh advice was called in from Worcester: and it was decided that the spine was permanently injured. Drew was removed to Worcester to the house of his widowed daughter: so as to have good nursing and advice. His furniture followed him, and the lodge where he had lived was left empty—for it was known that he would never be of use again. In one sense this was less of a misfortune to Drew than it would have been to many, for he had saved money and was comfortably off.

But the state of perplexity it threw Sir Dene Clanwaring into, was untellable. Drew had united the offices of bailiff and steward: he had not only been manager of the estate out of doors, but kept the accounts connected with it. Many of these papers on the table had been brought up from his house. Drew was too ill now to be consulted, or to be asked even a single question; and Sir Dene felt helpless as a child.

He knew absolutely nothing about the deeds and other matters. A school-boy, bade to sit down amidst a shoal of books, and prepare himself in one day for passing a civil service examination, could not have been more

hopelessly at fault than was the master of Beechhurst Dene. One person alone, of all the world, could have helped him out of his dilemma : and that was his discarded son, Geoffry.

Opening this parchment, shutting that, glancing at one receipt, throwing aside another, fuming and fretting ! While Sir Dene was thinking himself worse off than the babes in the wood, Gander entered.

" Farmer Hill has got me to come in and ask whether you'll be likely to keep him much longer, Sir Dene. He says he has a sight o' things to see about this morning."

Sir Dene groaned. He was no nearer finding the papers, necessary to the business on which Mr. Hill had come up, than he was an hour before.

" I don't know an iota about it, Gander ; that's the fact ; and I can find nothing. Tell Mr. Hill to call again to-morrow morning : I'm sorry to have kept him waiting. And—here, Gander. Is Mr. Clanwaring in ?"

" Mr. Clanwaring's lying on the sofa in the library, Sir Dene."

" Ask him to step here."

John Clanwaring appeared, a book in his hand. It was one of the volumes of a fa-

vourite work of the day. Sir Dene, in his helpless perplexity, appealed to his son.

“ You are younger than I am, John, and your brain’s clear. Mine’s clear enough too, in one sense ; but I’ve never been used to this kind of thing. Do you think you could help me ?”

“ In what way ?” asked Mr. Clanwaring—who had unwillingly dragged himself from London to spend Christmas at Beechhurst Dene, and intended to get away from it the moment he decently could.

“ Well, in—in looking into things. Getting some of these papers straight, for instance : and—and mastering the various matters connected with the estate.”

John Clanwaring quite believed he had not heard aright. “ *I*, sir. I could not possibly undertake anything of the kind.”

“ There’s nobody else so fit,” rather sharply spoke Sir Dene. “ It will be your own proper business sometime.”

“ I expect when that time comes—which I hope will not be yet awhile, father,” he broke off to say in a fit of duty—“ that I shall mostly leave it to a steward, as you have done.”

“ It is an awful trouble, for Drew to have

fallen out of things in this sudden way! Look at all these papers, John!—I can't make head or tail of them. And there's twice as many more down at his house."

John Clanwaring looked from the papers on the table to those standing out of the secrétaire. He would as soon have meddled with the Augean stables.

"And things are going on out of doors nearly as bad as they are within," resumed Sir Dene. "The men—when they work at all—do it all the wrong way. They plough up meadows, and leave—for goodness sake don't mix the papers, John! I've had work enough to sort them."

For Mr. Clanwaring, seeking for a place on which to deposit his book, had been pushing some of the papers one upon another.

"You won't try what you can do then, John?"

"As I should be sure to make no hand at it, sir, I had better not."

"At least you might ride about a bit, and direct out of doors."

"I should only mislead : knowing nothing about it myself, or what your wishes are. Besides, father, I shall be gone again in a day or two now. My chief home is London, you know, sir."

"What will you do when you come into the place after me? Whoever holds Beechhurst Dene should live on it."

"As, of course, I shall. It will be different then."

Sir Dene sat looking straight out before him. Some solution must be found to his present perplexity. His son spoke.

"If I were you, sir, I should engage a new bailiff forthwith. Some competent man of experience, who can grasp these matters at once, in Drew's place."

"Should you!" retorted Sir Dene. "He'd be more of a stranger to it all than I am: and who is there to put him in the right way, I'd like to know? There's only one man able to grasp them: and that's your brother Geoffry."

Mr. Clanwaring drew in his thin lips, and superciliously took up his book. He considered it an insult to the rest of the family for Geoffry to be so much as named in their hearing.

"If I put down a few heads of questions upon paper, John, would you mind riding over to Malvern, and getting the answers to them from Geoffry?"

"I should mind it very much indeed, sir.

Nothing would induce me to go on a mission to *him*. If absolutely necessary that someone should see him, send Gander."

Sir Dene, vexed with John, vexed with everybody, said no more: and Mr. Clanwaring seized on the opportunity to return to his sofa and his novel. The baronet had missed Geoffry all along; but never so much as now, at the close of the year.

After the first burst of indignation had blown over, consequent on the discovery of the marriage, Sir Dene had calmed down wonderfully. John went away again, Miss Clewer betook herself off: there was only Sir Dene at home, and he felt very lonely. Not an hour of the day but he thought of Geoffry, who had never before given him an undutiful look or word, who had been his constant companion of late years; he would often catch himself wishing that he could see Geoffry riding up the path. The applying to Geoffry to help him out of this dilemma, resulting from the incapacity of Drew, seemed therefore more easy of accomplishment to Sir Dene than if his feelings had retained their full bitterness against his son.

An hour longer he sat over these confusing papers, never touching them; attempting no

further to reduce them to order. Had he seen any other way out of the trouble, had any one living person, save Geoffry, been able to help him, he would not have sought out his discarded son. But there was no one else; and so Sir Dene could not well help himself. He waited, shilly-shallying, until the afternoon was passing; and then, saying nothing to John of his intention, ordered his horse and rode away in the direction of Malvern. In his heart of hearts, Sir Dene was glad of the opportunity of once more seeing Geoffry.

“*He never turned a deaf ear to any request of mine, as John does,*” thought the baronet bitterly. He would often feel a little bitter with his eldest son.

At this time Great Malvern was a very different place from what it is now: the houses did not much outnumber the hills. The cottage to whose lodgings Geoffry had taken his wife was a small abode nestled near the foot of the hill on the road leading to St. Ann’s Well. They had been married nearly two months now, and were in it still.

It would have been dull for the young wife, the Christmas in these confined lodgings, but

for the intense love she bore her husband. If hallowed by his presence all places were alike to her—a paradise. An African desert would not have been a desert with him. They were invited to spend Christmas Day at Harebell Farm : Geoffry Clarwaring accepted it because it would give pleasure to his wife. However, the day before Christmas Eve a deep snow set in, rendering the roads bad for travelling ; and so they stayed at home. A delusive dream of hope had lain on Geoffry—that his father might relent in the blessed Christmas-tide, and summons him and his young wife to Beechhurst Dene.

This was the last day of the old year ; and it was Geoffry's birthday. Twenty-six to-day. He had suddenly remembered it as they were seated at their one o'clock dinner, and proclaimed it to his wife.

“ Oh, Geoffry !—never to have told me ! Never to have let me wish you many happy returns of it when you woke this morning ? ”

“ I forgot all about it. You can wish it now, love.”

She got up and put her arms about his neck, whispering softly ; the tears filling her eyes with the intensity of her emotion. Geoffry held her to him while he thanked and

kissed her. Kissed her as fondly as he had on their wedding-day.

“We ought to have made a festival of it, Geoffry,” she said, going back to her place ; “to have had a plum-pudding at the very least. And there’s only this cold beef for you !”

“Cold beef is as good as hot, Maria.”

“I shall make a feast for tea.”

He laughed a little. “What will it be ? Roast peacock ?”

“Jam ; and pikelets ; and Malvern cakes.”

“You extravagant girl !”

“But it won’t be your birthday again until next year.”

When dinner was over, and Geoffry sat thinking of things, it occurred to him to wonder whether his birthday was being remembered at Beechhurst Dene ; and whether a letter of repentance, written to his father on that day, might produce any softening towards him. It would be necessary to try to induce Sir Dene to relent if possible ; for his little stock of hoarded money would not last for ever. He and Maria were practising plain economy : but times were hard at that period, provisions very dear.

“A letter will do no harm if it does no

good," decided Geoffry. "And in any case I should like to wish my father a happy New Year." So he drew his chair to the table and wrote.

The snow had disappeared some days now, and this day was very fine : but early in the afternoon that dense mist came on, well known to the dwellers under the Malvern Hills. It used to be worse than it ever is now : perhaps the mist cannot fight against the large town the place has grown into—the number of houses, their warmth, their lights, and the heat of the fires and gas. At half-past three o'clock, when Geoffry folded his letter, he could hardly see to write the address.

Sitting down by the fire, he stirred it into a blaze, and drew his wife to him. She was putting up her work, for it was too dark to continue it.

"Just look at the mist, Geoffry!"

"Ay. You cannot go out now, young lady, for your Malvern cakes. I shan't let you."

She had been saying that she would go with him when he went to post his letter. Maria looked out at the mist a little wistfully.

"You will bring the cakes in for me instead, won't you, Geoffry ? And the pikelets."

“ I dare say !”

“ And we will have tea early, and shut out the mist—say, half-past four. Oh Geoffry, it will be a happy evening !”

“ You little syren !”

He sat on, talking with her of the letter, of the probable effect it might have on Sir Dene ; and the minutes slipped on. When the clock struck four, Geoffry rose to go on his errand.

“ How many pikelets, and how many cakes ?”

“ Three pikelets,” she answered ; “ two for you and one for me. And three twopenny cakes.” “ Malvern cakes,” it should be said, had in those days a world-wide fame.

“ And the jam, you talked of ? I’m sure the shops will take me for a porter.”

“ Jam ! Oh, I have plenty of that. Mamma gave me some jars of several sorts, packed in a basket, when we were last there. Don’t you remember, Geoffry ?—we brought it home in the gig.”

Geoffry Clanwaring went into the bedroom for some silver, and departed. Maria called the landlady, asked her to bring in the best tea-things, and said there would be pikelets to toast. That worthy person immediately

turned crusty—which she had a habit of doing. The best tea-things she made no objection to : but the pikelets were pronounced “unpossible.” She had just raked up her kitchen fire, leaving only a spark o’ blaze to bibe the kettle, for she was a-going out later to watch-in the New Year with a friend. Pikelets couldn’t be toasted no-how at the black bars.

“Never mind, Mrs. Brown, I’ll toast them here,” said Maria cheerfully—who, young and timid, was entirely under Mrs. Brown’s dominion. “Bring in the butter, please, and the toasting-fork.” And Mrs. Brown bestirred herself.

“I shall dress in my best frock for this evening,” thought Maria, as she watched the woman lay the table. “I will go now, while Geoffry’s away, and surprise him. And then I shall be ready to do the pikelets.”

The first thing Maria saw when she entered the bedroom was the letter lying on the dressing-table. Geoffry must have laid it down, and forgotten it. She made ready, all but her dress ; then carried the letter to the other room, and waited, knowing he would be coming back for it.

Presently he appeared, with the paper of

pikelets, the cakes, and a beautiful pink camelia, that he had picked up somewhere, for Maria. She strenuously declared that it ought to be in his own coat, as it was his fête day. Geoffry laughed well at that, and put it in her dress-body, saying that a dandelion would be more in place for him.

"Do you know that you left Sir Dene's letter at home, Geoffry?"

"I know it now. The hunt I had in all my pockets when I went to put it into the box, amused the village boys amazingly."

He took the letter, went out again, and Maria hastened to attire herself in the gala robes. It was her wedding-dress that she put on; the beautiful sprigged India muslin she was married in. No opportunity had offered of wearing it since: and perhaps it was rather light in texture for this evening, what with the cold season, and what with the mist. Maria deemed it the most appropriate dress in the world—for was it not her husband's birthday?

With her beautiful hair falling; with no ornament in the delicate robe, save the pink camelia; with her pretty white neck and arms bare, after the fashion of the day, Maria Clanwaring returned to the parlour as charm-

ing a picture as man's eye ever rested on. The candles were lighted on the table ; and —if she stole a glance of admiration at herself in the chimney-glass, vanity itself would forgive the sin.

"Geoffry will not know me," she softly said, as she knelt down to toast the pikelets. "Why !—how soon he is back !"

For the front door had been knocked at, and answered. Steps approached the room ; the door was flung wide, just as Geoffry flung it.

"You'll not know me, Geoffry," she called out.

"Is Geoffry Clanwaring here ?"

The voice was a strange voice, proud and stern. Maria started up, nearly dropping the pikelet off the toasting-fork into the ashes. She felt ready to drop too when she saw Sir Dene. They stood, gazing at each other : Maria in trembling dismay ; Sir Dene in involuntary admiration.

Never in all his life had he seen so lovely a picture. She looked, in this white dress, little more than a child, with her smooth falling curls, her blushing cheeks, and her delicate face. Gently putting down the fork —it was at least a yard and a half long—she

moved a little nearer, in all shrinking modesty, to receive him.

"You are my son's wife, I suppose, young lady?"

"Yes, sir."

"And one to make any son forget his allegiance for," muttered Sir Dene to himself. "Hanged if I can be sure I should not have done as Geoff did!"

"Will you please to take a seat, sir?" she ventured to ask.

"I'll shake hands with you first, my dear," he said. And, taking her hand, he stooped and kissed her.

The tears rushed into Maria Clanwaring's eyes at the unexpected kindness. Sir Dene saw them, and kissed her a second time.

"There's nothing to cry for, my dear."

"Oh, sir, it is your kindness! I think Geoffry, when he knows it, will be nearly ready to cry too."

"Where is Geoffry?" asked the baronet, sitting down.

"He has gone out to put a letter in the post: it is for you, sir. He will not be long."

"And you were toasting pikelets for tea," said Sir Dene, observing the good things on the table.

"The landlady had let her fire go low, sir, and could not do them. But it is Geoffry's birthday."

"His birthday!" cried Sir Dene. "I forgot it."

"That is why we are having a nice tea," she continued, half in apology, deeming some kind of explanation necessary.

"And why you are dressed up," added Sir Dene smiling, as he glanced at the set-out table.

"Yes, sir. It is my best white frock. I—" was married in it, she had been about to add, but remembered in time to change the words—"had just put it on. Geoffry brought me home this beautiful flower."

A beautiful flower no doubt: but a sweeter flower, she. A simple, guileless pure girl: that was self-evident. Sir Dene had been in the room but two or three minutes, and he felt that he nearly loved her. The next entrance was that of Geoffry: who stood in unmitigated astonishment. Between his father's presence and his wife's dress, he thought he must be looking at a vision.

Sir Dene did not shake hands with his son. An idea struck him that it might be a compromise of dignity to do that all at once. He

told Geoffry, speaking distantly, of the difficulty he was placed in through the accident to Drew, and that he should require his assistance to disentangle affairs from the confusion that, to him, they appeared to be in. Geoffry at once replied that he would do anything and everything in his power. Seeing them thus engaged, Maria, almost by stealth, resumed her toasting. Geoffry came up, and would have taken the fork from her.

"I'll do this, my dear—if it has to be done here? What's Mrs. Brown about?"

"She has let her fire out. *Please*, Geoffry, let me do it," she whispered. "Indeed, indeed I would rather! Stay you with Sir Dene."

She was in real earnest, her trembling voice and her eyes alike pleading anxiously. So Geoffry relinquished the fork to her and returned to his father. When the pikelets were buttered and the tea made, she waited by the fire in silence. Geoffry looked at the table and looked at his father.

"Would you take some tea with us, sir," he asked with much deprecation.

"I don't care if I have a cup," said Sir Dene. "The mist has got into my throat."

So they all sat down together; Maria's

hand shaking visibly when she handed him his cup. “A good, modest, gentle girl, and every inch a lady—as poor Geoff said,” again thought Sir Dene. “She’s worth a dozen of John’s grand London wenches, with their powdered and patched faces.”

Sir Dene partook of the good things with much relish; the pikelets, the cakes, the strawberry jam; and he drank three cups of tea. He said he must go unless he would be entirely benighted. He did not kiss Maria when he went away: but he shook hands cordially, and called her “my dear.” It was arranged that Geoffry should meet Sir Dene at Drew’s house as early as he could get there after breakfast in the morning. Geoffry walked down with his father to the small inn—the Unicorn—where he had left his horse; and saw him mount. Sir Dene gave him his hand.

“Thank you, father, for coming over,” said Geoffry in a low tone that was full of feeling. “Thank you doubly for speaking kindly to my wife.”

“Well, you see, Geoffry, she’s—she’s very nice and pretty.”

“She is more than that, father. Good night, sir.”

Standing over the fire with his wife when he got back, his arm round her waist, her head leaning against him, Geoffry Clanwaring spoke of the hopeful turn that affairs seemed to have taken. He had been feeling the estrangement from his father and his home far more deeply than he had ever cared to tell his wife.

“Sir Dene may not take us into full favour quite at once, Maria; it is not to be expected; but I think the way is being paved for it.”

“He kissed me, Geoffry,” she whispered, her eyes shining through their glad tears.

“Kissed you!”

“He kissed me twice; he did indeed. It was when he first came in.”

“Thank God!” thought Geoffry. But he said nothing. Only held his wife the closer.

CHAPTER X.

THE BAILIFF'S LODGE.

BE you very sure Geoffry Clanwaring did not let the grass grow under his horse's feet in riding over to Hurst Leet the following morning, New Year's Day. Break of day had seen him in the saddle. At Drew's house he found Simmonds the gamekeeper: who had been placed in it to take care of things upon the bailiff's departure.

It was a very pretty place, this dwelling, commonly called the bailiff's lodge. Mr. Honeythorn used to say it was too good for Jonathan Drew. Had a gentleman been the inhabitant, it would have been a cottage ornée. Sheltered amidst trees and shrubs, with some of the same kind of yellow jasmine on its walls that had been on the Widow Barber's, it was as rural a lodgment as any in the district. There were two sitting-rooms:

one, used as a bureau, or office, by Drew, contained the papers and things relating to the estate ; the other had not been used at all ; for Mr. Drew had found the kitchen good enough for his meals and evenings. The chambers above were three : two large, one small.

Geoffry Clanwaring sat down at once to the papers ; and when Sir Dene arrived, they were all in nice order for the explanation to him. For a good half-hour Sir Dene did his best to master them ; and found it a failure.

“ I’ll tell you what it is, Geoffry,” said he. “ I shall make nothing of these things myself : my capacity does not lie in this bent, I think ; and John won’t attempt it—though he ought. You will have to come back again.”

“ I should desire nothing better than to be allowed to come back,” spoke Geoffry with candour.

“ Not to Beechhurst Dene,” hastily rejoined the baronet, fearing he might be misunderstood. “ That could not be. I should have your brothers up in arms : John especially. Reginald is at a safe distance, thank goodness. He can write sharp letters, though.”

“ I did not think of coming back to Beechhurst Dene, sir,” said Geoffry quietly.

"That's well. Look here, Geoffry : I must speak out plainly, and then we shall understand each other," continued Sir Dene. "You were guilty of an act, marrying as you did, entirely unjustifiable : it involved, to me, both disobedience and ingratitude. Had your wife been—been—different from what she is ; had she been vulgar or upstart, for instance, I could never have forgiven you. Never. As it is—well, I must partly forgive you. Though I cannot receive you on a familiar footing as one of my sons, or welcome you to Beechhurst Dene, I will extend to you my countenance in a degree. If you are not above taking the management of things in Drew's place, why I will make it worth your while."

"I am not above it I assure you, sir," said Geoffry ; "but would accept the post and thank you very truly. After all, I shall only be doing what I have done ever since you bought the property. More responsibility will lie on me ; somewhat more work : that is the only difference, sir."

"You would have to live on the spot, you know."

"Of course. Why could I not have this house, sir?"

Sir Dene coughed. With all his vexation,

with all Geoffry's misdoings, he had not liked to propose that a son of his should succeed to the bailiff's cottage.

"It would be the best and most convenient thing. But I thought you might not like it, Geoffry."

Geoffry Clanwaring smiled. "After our two rooms at Malvern, sir, I fear I and Maria shall be fancying ourselves in a palace here."

"Then that's all settled, Geoffry," concluded Sir Dene gladly, as if he experienced a kind of relief. "I'll have some furniture put into it, and you had better move over without delay. Or, stay. Do you get the furniture, Geoffry," added Sir Dene on second thoughts: "you know best what will please you and your wife. Pay for it out of the funds: you'll have plenty in hand now."

"Thank you very much, father."

"And now come up to Beechhurst," said Sir Dene. "The papers there are in a fine mess: and Hill no doubt is in a passion at being kept waiting two mornings running. He was already there when I came away."

They walked up the new road, Dene Hollow. It was only natural that the spot should bring back the remembrance of Drew's accident. Geoffry, who had not heard much of

the particulars, inquired how Dobbin, known to be so sure-footed, came to throw his rider.

“ Nobody seems to be able to tell,” replied Sir Dene. “ Drew says he can’t. It made me think of our accident, Geoffry: we never could imagine what possessed the horses, you know. ’Twas just in the same spot, too.”

“ It seems odd,” said Geoffry.

“ Our mishap was odd—and to me always will be—but I don’t say as much for Drew’s. Many a horse, brave as a lion by day, will start at shadows cast by the moonlight. Besides——”

“ Besides what, sir?” asked Geoffry. For Sir Dene had made a sudden pause.

“ Well, Geoff—though I’d not mention it to any one but you,” broke off Sir Dene confidentially—“ I cannot help thinking that Drew must have had a drop more than was good for him at the time. He had had a long and tedious journey, and the night was cold. If a man’s seat is not steady, a slight thing will unhorse him: the very fact of Dobbin’s galloping down the hill might do it.”

“ I have never once seen Drew the worse for drink,” was Geoffry’s reply to this.

“ Neither have I—don’t think I would asperse the man causelessly,” returned Sir

Dene. "Priar, too, says he was sober. But still there's a lurking doubt on my mind that he was not himself: and I don't say it without a reason."

"What is the reason, sir?" naturally questioned Geoffry.

Upon that, Sir Dene told the tale—calling it a cock-and-bull story—that had been told to him: of what Drew saw, or thought he saw, at the Trailing Indian. Sir Dene entirely disbelieved it. The surgeon had informed him what Black's version was; and Sir Dene, judging by common sense, believed that to be the true version. Geoffry listened in silence.

"Now what I think is this, Geoff: That no man could go the length of fancying he saw what Drew fancied, unless his imagination and eyesight were both a little helped by drink. If it was so, this would account for the accident. Drew confesses he was going down here at a tolerable pace."

Sir Dene turned his eyes on the road as he spoke. They were just abreast of the spot.

"Did Drew hold to his story afterwards?" asked Geoffry.

"In the most positive manner. He says he was never in his life more sure of anything than he is that the coffin came out of the inn.

Of course, having fancied he saw it, it became impressed upon his imagination."

"For my own part, I should not be disposed to trust to a word asserted by Black," remarked Geoffry. "I'd rather believe Drew."

"Nonsense," said Sir Dene. "Drew's story carries improbability on the face of it; whereas Black's has been confirmed. There was nobody ill at the Trailing Indian: nobody was stopping there: so how could anybody die?"

"In what way was Black's account confirmed?" asked Geoffry.

"He said that the hearse merely called at the inn to bait the horses. About ten o'clock, he told Priar, it drove in. Now it happened that some man Priar knows saw a hearse turn off the turnpike road at that hour and drive in to the inn yard. So far, Black was confirmed."

"Yes," acquiesced Geoffry. But it crossed his mind that the hearse must equally have driven in sometime had its errand been to fetch the dead away.

"Have you seen Black, sir, and questioned him upon the subject?"

"Not I," said Sir Dene. "Why should I? He would probably tell me to my face that

hearses are just as much at liberty to demand refreshment at his house as carriages. In short, I hold no doubt whatever that the whole explanation, both of that and the subsequent accident, lies in the fact that Drew had taken a glass too much."

"It may have been so, sir. But I have a bad opinion of Black. I don't think he would stick at much."

"It is just this, Geoff, as I believe ; that Black's case is an illustration of the old saying, 'Give a dog a bad name, and hang him.' He is not a white sheep by any means : but I dare say report makes him out to be a great deal worse than he is in reality. Come along."

In going up the slight ascent, Sir Dene, quite unconsciously, took Geoffry's arm. Forgetting the escapade of which his son had been guilty, quite forgetting the late estrangement, he put his arm within Geoffry's as he used to do. A gentleman, who happened to be walking amidst the trees on the high bank above them that skirted the side of the road, approached the edge and cautiously leaned over to look down. It was the heir, John Clanwaring. He had recognised his father's voice, and wondered who it was that he was with.

And if Mr. Clanwaring had seen Sir Dene familiarly walking with a long-armed baboon, he could not have felt more utterly astonished. With Geoffry!—arm in arm! John Clanwaring closed his eyes for a moment and opened them again, thinking perhaps some mist obscured his sight. But no. It was Geoffry. Geoffry the renegade! The heir stood holding on by the firm tree-trunk, watching them up, and wondering whether his father had gone clean mad.

He watched them in at the gates of Beechhurst Dene: he saw the woman at the lodge run out to drop a curtsey to her master. She dropped two—two!—to Geoffry. Mr. Clanwaring came to the conclusion that not only Sir Dene must be mad, but a great part of the world beside him.

Little suspecting that condemning eyes were following them, Sir Dene and Geoffry continued their way to the house, turning off to the side entrance. Mr. Clanwaring went on slowly to the front, gained the library, and rang an imperious peal on the bell for Gander.

“Did Sir Dene come in a few minutes ago?”

“Yes, sir,” was the man’s reply. “He’s

come in with Mr. Geoffry. They be hard at work amid the papers in Sir Dene's parlour. Hill at the Lea farm is gone in to 'em now."

From Gander's long service in the family, and the confidential terms he was on with the boys when they were young, they said anything to him, never caring to be reticent.

"I wonder Sir Dene did not kick him out, rather than hand him into his parlour," quoth Mr. Clanwaring, standing before the fire with his coat-tails under his arm, and speaking deliberately.

"Mr. Geoffry have come by appointment, sir," said Gander, who liked the younger brother ten times better than he did the elder. "Leastways, I take it to be so."

"And why do you 'take it' to be so?" scornfully asked the heir.

"Because Sir Dene says to me last night, says he, 'Mind you get a good fire early in my parlour, Gander: I'm expecting Mr. Geoffry on business.' That's why, sir."

"Mr. Geoffry must have the impudence of Satan to write and proffer a visit *here*," cried John Clanwaring, assuming such to have been the fact.

"Well, Mr. Clanwaring, it strikes me that

"Sir Dene went and fetched him," returned Gander confidentially, secretly rejoicing that he had it to say. "When Sir Dene got home last night, he told the groom that him and his horse had a'most got lost in the mist, coming down the Link. So we took it that he must have been to Malvern."

Worse and worse. John Clanwaring signed impatiently for Gander to go, and then indulged his wrath alone. Let us give him his due : except on the score of the marriage, he had no ill-feeling against Geoffry ; but in his proud and haughty temper, he considered that act had brought a stain on the family not to be redeemed.

The morning wore on. Sir Dene and Geoffry remained in the parlour, very busy. At luncheon time Gander went to tell his master that it was ready.

Sir Dene rose ; and sat down again. How could he go to his luncheon and not ask Geoffry ? And yet—to invite him to partake of a meal in the house would look as if his offence were entirely condoned. And (here lay the obstacle) what would John say ?

"Oh, bother John—I can't help it," mentally spoke Sir Dene in his perplexity. "Will you come and have some lunch,

Geoffry? You must be peckish after your early ride."

"Thank you, sir," said Geoffry. And rose to follow him.

In the dining-room stood the heir. When he saw Geoffry come in with his father, quite as it used to be, to sit down at the same table, one of the family, he felt that it was a little more than he could stand. Geoffry went up to him, his kindly eyes looking straight into his brother's, as he held out his hand hesitatingly.

"You would not shake my hand the last time we parted, John : your anger was fresh against me then. Will you now?"

"No," said John Clanwaring, in a voice low from concentrated passion. He was never loud, this young man ; but all the more firm and bitter.

"And yet, my father has—in a degree—forgiven me!"

"But that I see—what I see—with my own eyes, I had not believed that Sir Dene would have lent his countenance to disgrace."

"Oh hang it, John!" interposed Sir Dene testily, not feeling over-comfortable, and half ashamed of his own leniency. "Geoffry is the only one who can help me out of the

confusion caused by Drew's departure. *You would not try, you know. Come, sit down.*"

"No, Sir Dene. Not with him."

"He is your brother, John."

"Unfortunately—yes. But I can never again regard him as one."

Mr. Clanwaring stalked deliberately out of the room, vouchsafing no further notice. Ordering Gander, as he brushed by the man, to bring him a plate of something to the library.

"You see the difficulties I have to contend with, Geoffry," quietly remarked Sir Dene, when they sat down. "I can't do quite as I would."

"Yes, sir, I see," was the answer. "Be assured I will not intrude upon you here, unnecessarily to increase them."

And so, Geoffry Clanwaring and his wife took up their abode in the bailiff's lodge. And the months went on.

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE SAME SPOT.

MR. AND MRS. OWEN sat at supper in the ordinary living room at Harebell Farm. They were taking it later than usual. It was Saturday, and Easter Eve. The farmer had been over to Worcester market; after his business was transacted, he had gone to stay the evening with his daughter Mary and her husband and invite them to spend Easter Day at the farm. Which made him late in reaching home.

“How does she look, Robert?” questioned Mrs. Owen, upon his saying that the invitation was declined.

“Polly? She is—I don’t see that she looks much better,” was the cautious answer. Glancing at his wife from under his handsome eyelids, Robert Owen decided that she was too poorly just now to be troubled unnecessa-

rily. The impulsive reply he had been about to utter was, "She is worse, and weaker."

"And the baby?"

"Oh, that's peart enough. It's a pretty little thing : can almost talk."

Mrs. Owen laughed slightly. "Almost talk! Why, she is but nine months old yet."

"Any way, she tries to. Girls are never backward with their tongues. The child had got its sleeves looped up with a row of pink coral beads, gold clasps," continued Mr. Owen. "Squire Arde took them there this week. He said they had belonged to his own child when she was a baby."

"That is a curious thing for Squire Arde to do!" exclaimed Mrs. Owen after a pause of consideration. "One would think he must have taken a fancy to the child."

"Oh I don't know," said the less imaginative farmer. "He might have thought 'twas as well to put the beads to use—lying by and doing nothing. Polly was saying that Geoffry Clanwaring and Maria have promised to go over for a day next week."

Supper over, Mary Barber came in to take the tray away. Joan, the hard-working household servant, was never kept up later than ten, except on an emergency. It was

nearly eleven now, and she had been in bed an hour. The farmer began looking about for his cap.

"Have you to go out again to-night, Robert?" asked Mrs. Owen.

"As far as the two-acre meadow: I must take a look at Lightfoot."

"Bugle is sure to have gone round there the last thing," she rejoined, slightly in remonstrance.

"Not so sure, Betsey," was the dissenting answer. "He has been growing lazy lately—or careless. Was Cole up to-day, do you know?"

"Yes. Joan said she saw him in the yard with Bugle. I am sure you must be tired, Robert. I don't see that you need go."

"I shall go," persisted the farmer, rather obstinately. "You had better get to bed, as it's late."

"Then you'll read now," said Mrs. Owen. For the day was always finished up at Harebell Farm with a chapter from the Bible. As Robert Owen took the book, his wife opened the parlour door.

"Mary, will you come into the reading?"

"I be busy, missis," was the reply given back to her from the kitchen.

"It will not hinder you more than two or three minutes," said Mrs. Owen.

"It'll hinder me more time than I can spare, with all these here late supper things to clear up : and I'm sure I'm not a-going to leave 'em till morning," returned independent Mary Barber. "The master can read without me to-night, missis." And Mrs. Owen shut the door again.

He was going regularly through the gospels, and read the chapter at which he had left off the previous night—the eighth of St. Mark. Then he put on his great coat ; took his hat—not readily finding the cap he kept for night use—and went out.

It was a night late in March, almost April, but different from the one twelve months before, when the two men in smock-frocks had gone stealing up Harebell Lane. That night was bright and gusty ; this, still and misty. The moon ought to have been out to-night, but was not. Lightfoot, a favourite cow, was lying ill in the shed off the two-acre paddock ; and Robert Owen had latterly had cause to doubt the attention of Bugle, his herdsman : hence his personal visit. He reached the shed ; found all tolerably right there, and turned his steps homewards again.

Ever since he came out, his thoughts had been glancing back to the chapter he had read : now that his mind was at rest as to Lightfoot, he let them dwell entirely upon it.

“ Ay, true,” ran his reflections ; “ what shall it profit—though a man gain the whole world, if he lose his own soul ? ‘Tis but a short life here at best : and there’s all the never-ending ages of Eternity to succeed it. Why don’t we, throughout our poor brief lives, take better note of the lessons God has written for us ?”

Why it was that Robert Owen should have taken “ better note ” latterly, he could not tell. The fact was so. Without any apparent will of his, he had found his thoughts turned absolutely on serious things, and on the life—that must come after this life. Three months ago, at the new year, he had quite electrified his wife (and astonished the parson) by staying at church to take the sacrament. For Robert Owen, like too many more householders of the district—and of other districts too, for that matter—had not been in the habit of doing such a thing. They were content to leave this practical part of religion to the women and to a future time. Perhaps it was the thought of his dying daughter—for that Mary Arde-

was dying, dying gradually, lay on him with a conviction firm and sure—that brought these reflections home to him, especially to-night. They had never been more vivid.

“Poor young Tom gone on, and Polly going : William and Maria left. Two in that world : two in this. Somehow, I feel as if I’d as soon go as stay. If Betsey—halloo ! Who’s abroad at this hour ?”

The sound of footsteps and suppressed voices had struck upon his ear. He was in that narrow pathway, between the grove of trees and the fence, just above Harebell Pond. As it had been that past night twelve months before, so it was this. The two self-same men—or two that looked precisely like them—came stealing up the lane ; nothing was in their hands : but by daylight their smock-frocks might have looked rather bulky. Just as Robert Owen had been in that spot and watched them pass that other night, here he was, this. It was a singular coincidence : he had never seen men since in that particular spot.

He stood his ground, leaning sideways against the fence and looking at them as they came on. It was sufficiently light for them to see him there, but they passed on without speaking ; apparently without looking.

"More underhand work at the Trailing Indian," thought Robert Owen, as he pursued his way homewards. "I wish that affair of what Drew saw was cleared up! I don't like it—and so I told Priar; in spite of Mr. Randy Black's glib explanation. However, it is no business of mine."

The men were the same that had 'gone up the former night—Michael Geach and Robson. They arrived at the Trailing Indian in a state of fury. Even Geach, generally so careless and easy, had changed his tone of late, and become quite as savage as Robson in regard to what they thought was the espionage of the master of Harebell Farm.

"It's true, as I'm a living man, Black!" he foamed, when they were disencumbering themselves in the private room of sundry articles that had been stuffed about them. "In that old spy-place, just above the pond, there he was, the devil."

Black answered by some of his bad language.

"I'll tell ye what it is, mates," spoke up Robson, waking from a sullen reverie, and bringing his closed hand down with passionate force upon the table—"that there man must

have some means o' getting at our movements.
It's as sure as eggs is eggs."

"I have thought so some months past, be shot if I've not," acquiesced the landlord.

Geach, never prone to be very suspicious, glanced questioningly from one to the other. He did not readily understand. "What d'ye mean?" he asked.

"What do us mean," retorted Robson, "why, what should us mean? Owen has got spies at work, and lays hisself out to watch us according to the information they bring him in. Don't ye be a fool, Geach."

"I'm no more a fool than somebody else is. How could Owen have spies at work?"

"I dun' know how he could: he *has*," retorted Robson. "Send me dumb, if it ain't so. Warn't he stuck in that there place to-night, awaiting and awatching for us? But for expecting of us to come, would he ha' been out at this hour, perched *there*? No: it don't stand to reason as he 'ould. There be none of his ewes i' th' mead now."

"Robson's right," spoke Black. "I've been a'most sure of it since the night he watched the load away in the hearse. How could he ha' knowned anything was to be took away that there particular night, but for

being informed of it? Would he have stopped out at that there stile a watching our place till past midnight for nothing? You must be a fool, Geach, if you think he'd ha' posted himself there on spec."

A silence ensued, the three men looking at each other. If this really were so—that Mr. Owen had spies at work—it affected their interests in a very grave manner. Geach began to come round to their way of thinking.

"What possesses the man?—what does he do it for?" he asked, scarcely above his breath.

"Ah, what does he do it for?" repeated Black, sneeringly. Why, to get me out o' the Trailing Indian. Now that that girl of hisn's married to Sir Dene's son, of course Owen's got the young man's ear—'twas only him that set the young fellow on me at the time you know of: pretty broad hints, too, them he gave about the doings here! Owen is a-plotting to get us out o' the place: nothing more nor nothing less."

Robson rubbed the moisture from his startled face. "They might be down upon ye at any time, Black. He might ha' come over that there night, folks helping him, and

looked into the coffin. My patience ! What on *earth* should we ha' done ?"

"Have ye heard much about that since, Randy?" resumed Geach. "Had more questions asked?"

"Never one—though I've waited for 'em," replied Black. "Neither from Priar nor nobody else. They've got hold of the tale round the place, though, and call it Randy Black's coffin. The mischief was, getting it away of a light night, you see ; but 'twas in a hurry : and who was to fear eyes would be in this lonely place at midnight? I wish Owen had been dead, I do, afore he had seen it!"

"But what's to be *done* with the man?" demanded Geach, his eyes ablaze with excitement. "We can't submit to be watched in this way; 'twould be destruction : and we shall want the hearse again soon."

"Hang him," said Robson, quietly, by way of answer. "Twouldn't be no sin," he defiantly added. "Hanging's the nat'r'al punishment o' spies. And he's a spy, out and out."

Again the men looked at each other, very meaningly. Black broke the silence.

"He'd only get his] deserts. Trust me for one thing, both of you : Owen shall be out of

Harebell Farm, afore he gets me out o' the Trailing Indian."

Jonathan Drew's sight had not deceived him ; neither had he taken anything to obscure it. The hearse had brought the coffin to the inn, deposited it inside the house, empty, and received it again, filled, two hours afterwards. This hearse was in the habit of making periodical visits to the Trailing Indian, always at the ghostly hours of night. But—to relieve the reader's feelings—it may as well be stated that it never took away a human occupant, alive or dead. Had the coffin been charged and opened, by Mr. Jonathan Drew that moonlight night, it would have been found to contain nothing worse than closely-packed layers of valuable lace, with some costly articles of jewelry wedged in between them.

It was a sure and safe way of transporting articles to London, or elsewhere, which might not be sent in the broad light of day. Who would dream of suspecting a hearse, whether travelling along the highway by moonlight or sunlight ; or of searching the coffin inside it ? Not even a Bow Street runner.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MORNING DREAM.

THE bells of Hurst Leet church wafted their melodious sound up to Harebell Farm in the stillness of the Sabbath morning. When the wind set this way, their chimes could be heard distinctly. The thick mist of the previous night—when Mr. Owen had walked to the two-acre meadow and seen the men stealing up Harebell Lane on their way to the Trailing Indian—had given place to a clear atmosphere. The air was bright, the sun shone, the skies were blue. Generally speaking, Hurst Leet bells only gave out a brief ding-dong, to show the world that it was Sunday; to-day they were ringing. It was the custom of Hurst Leet church at that period to administer the Sacrament four times in the year: at Christmas and Easter; at

Midsummer and Michaelmas. On those occasions the bells rang cheerily for a few minutes at early morning. This was Easter Sunday.

Mary Barber was laying the cloth for breakfast when the bells broke out ; the sound caught her ear through the open window. She turned sharply round to look at the cuckoo clock against the wall. It wanted ten minutes to eight.

“ I was sure it was behind,” she exclaimed to herself testily. “ That clock’s always getting itself slow now.”

Robert Owen came down the stairs, before the words had well left her lips, and entered the room. Never was the man’s singular beauty more remarkable than on a Sunday morning, when he was always dressed as a gentleman. He looked rather surprised not to see the breakfast laid : for the farm was punctual in its habits and sat down precisely at eight on a Sunday ; on week-days at seven.

“ You be down to the minute, master,” was her greeting. “ And I be late.”

It was so very unusual a thing for Mary Barber to be “ late ” that Mr. Owen slightly lifted his eyebrows at the acknowledgment. “ Your mistress is late too,” he observed,

"and will not be down for some minutes. She has had a bad night."

"What *I* did was to drop asleep just as I ought to have been a getting up," said Mary Barber. I have had a bad night too—in one sense : and I've a great mind to tell you, master, *why*."

Her manner, as she said it, was very peculiar. Mr. Owen, who had gone to the open window and was listening to the bells, turned and looked at her.

"I have had an ugly dream, master. Two dreams in one, as may be said ; for I woke between 'em ; and then went to sleep and dreamed it on again. 'Twas about you."

Mary Barber was superstitious in the matter of dreams. She did not have them often. Very rarely. It must be confessed that two or three times in her life her dreams had appeared to foreshadow coming events—events that afterwards happened. When young, she had dreamed of the death of her father, and told the dream : some few days subsequently, his death, which was quite unexpected, took place.

Robert Owen smiled. He was one of the least superstitious men living : would as soon have put faith in a ghost as a dream.

"Yes, sir," she said, the smile somewhat nettling her, "I know how you'll ridicule all I say. But I think I'd better say it for all that. There's some ill in store for you, master ; so take care of yourself."

"Is the ill ghostly or bodily?" he rejoined. And Mary Barber did not like the evident mockery, good-natured though it was.

"Bodily, I should imagine," was the half defiant answer, as the tea-spoons were rattled into the saucers. "Listen to me while I tell you, master," she added ; "it will be off my conscience."

"You had better be quick about it, then, or you will have your mistress down," he said in resignation. "It may be as well not to tell dreams to her, if they are ugly ones."

She finished putting the things in their places on the cloth, and then stood in front of the table, facing him. Mr. Owen was at the open window still, listening to the bells.

"Master, I thought in my sleep that it was to-day dawning ; this very same Easter Sunday that *is*. All of us here seemed to be in a peck o' trouble ; in great distress : and it was about you. You had to go somewhere : I don't know why or wherefore. It seemed to us that if you did go, some awful ill would

come of it : ill to you ; we knew that it would ; and yet there seemed no help for it ; never a thought crossed any of us to say, Don't go. It seemed just one o' them things that *must be*, that's as sure as night or day ; there was no question of passing it. We were in frightful distress : it was worse than any we can ever feel in this world ; sharper and more real. Dreams are vivid ; I often think they picture things a bit like what they'll be in heaven ; that is, when we shall no longer see through a glass darkly. There was never such distress in this house, master, as we seemed to be in then, and because you had to go : it was just a keen anguish. The whole lot of us were crying bitterly."

" What do you call the 'whole lot ?'" questioned Robert Owen, as she paused.

" I don't know. I think my missis and the young lasses were here ; I know it was home ; this farm, these rooms ; and several of us stood about. The only face I clearly remember was Joan's : she was sitting down on the wooden chair by the ironing-board in the kitchen, her hands clasped on her linsey apron, and her eyes hot and red with tears. Nobody but you seemed to be unconcerned, master."

"Oh, I did, did I?"

"You were moving about among us; I saw you more than once. But you seemed not to notice us, and not to feel any of the trouble that we felt—not to know of it. 'When's the master going?' I said to Joan; and I woke before she had time to answer."

"Is that all?" cried the master, far more absorbed by the bells, whose sound he loved, than by the tale.

"No, master; it's not all. I woke up with the distress, as it seemed; and I thought to myself what a strange dream. I wondered what the time o' night was, and got up and looked from the window. Dawn was just a glimmering, and I saw the mist had cleared. I got into bed, dropped asleep, and was in the dream again. The same dream, master; it seemed to go on just as if I'd never woke. Joan was standing by the same chair, not sitting then, and she was cleaned now and had got her best things on. But you were gone, master: and I saw, as plainly as I could ever see awake, her red and swollen eyes. The house seemed to be in the same awful distress as before—it couldn't be worse—and we never could feel it like that in life. We all set off to look for you, master, a great lot

of us, it was ; but we knew in our hearts that, look as we would, you would never again come back to us : we knew it as certainly as we can know anything in this world. All the same, we ran, crying sadly ; some went up the lane, and some went over the fields, and some hadn't got beyond the fold-yard : but all of us bearing off for the same point, as it were : and all a looking for you."

" Which point ? The moon ?"

" The Trailing Indian," she answered, too much wrapt in her tale to resent the words. " At least, it was towards that direction that we all seemed to be making for. I was one o' them in the lane, and I awoke with the running. This clock was striking half-after five, master ; and I sat up on end in bed, and asked myself what the strange dream could mean. The tears stood in my eyes, and the sweat was on my brow, with the sorrow and the running. I've never hardly had such a life-like dream as that."

Mr. Owen made no answer.

" I lay a thinking what it could mean. Then I went and called Joan, for 'twas time ; and, after that, I lay thinking again. Just as I ought to have got up, I dropped asleep : and that has made us late, master."

Mr. Owen bent his ear to catch the last chime of the bells. To him they were as of the sweetest melody.

"And, master, I'm not able to tell what it means, though it has never been for a minute out o' my thoughts since I got up. But, as sure as can be, it forebodes some ill for you."

"The bells have finished," said Mr. Owen, as the vibration of their sound was dying slowly away. "Mary, woman, I'd not let a foolish dream disturb me, if I were you."

"I know that it makes just as much impression upon you, sir, as if I said I had read it in the newspaper," returned Mary Barber tartly. "But I've told it you; and my conscience is, so far, at ease: and I'd say further, take what care you can o' yourself. That's all, master."

She whisked out of the room, brought in a dish of ham, and set it on the table with a dash. Mr. Owen had his prayer-book in his hand, looking out the proper psalms for the Easter service.

"Master, what ails Mr. George Arde and his wife, that they can't come over to-day for their Easter dinner?" resumed Mary Barber in a different tone, for she had done with the

other subject for good. "Our chiscakes 'll be good enough for gentlefolks, I'll answer for't."

"Cheesecakes!—it is not a question of cheesecakes," he answered, with a sigh. "Polly is not strong enough to come. Unless I am mistaken, this is the last Easter she'll see in this world."

"Perhaps if she'd make an effort, master, she might ha' got here," suggested Mary Barber in a softer tone—for the answer somewhat appeased the resentment she was feeling against things generally, and especially against herself for having dropped asleep when she ought to have got up. "Our chiscakes is beautiful, this Easter: and Miss Polly always was fond of 'em. The baby might ha' pecked a bit, too. Miss Maria never cared for 'em as Miss Polly did."

"We must send her some, Mary Barber."

"Ay, master, that us will. I don't like to hear of her getting worse. At Christmas she looked like nothing but a drooping snow-drop. Tom was enough to go, without—"

"Hush!—here's your mistress," was the warning interruption.

Mrs. Owen entered; and not a word more was spoken on either of the two subjects that master and maid had just then at heart: she,

the dream ; he, his daughter's failing strength. Mrs. Owen was in too delicate health herself to be troubled unnecessarily.

Again Robert Owen stayed to partake of the Sacrament after morning service ; and again Mrs. Owen (she was in the habit of staying), and the parson equally wondered. Geoffry Clanwaring and his wife also stayed —for the first time together. Sir Dene was in his pew as usual ; but afforded himself no opportunity of speaking to Geoffry and Maria. He always came out of church when the congregation, including his son and daughter-in-law, had departed.

Things were going on quietly between Sir Dene and Geoffry. They met frequently on business matters, and Sir Dene seemed cordial ; now and then he would say, “How’s your wife, Geoff?” But Geoffry had not been invited to take a meal at Beechhurst since that luncheon, already told of : his visits there were confined to business ones in Sir Dene’s parlour. If any rare necessity brought Sir Dene to the Bailiff’s lodge, he would shake hands with Maria, and speak very kindly.

Sir Dene was alone this Easter. John Clanwaring had sent a wordy excuse for not quitting London. The heir was engaged to

be married now, and his ladye-love had claims on his time. Geoffry, knowing all this, had wondered whether Sir Dene might open his heart and invite him and his wife to partake of dinner at Beechhurst. But nothing of the kind took place.

So Geoffry and his wife went up to dine at Harebell Farm, and stayed there the rest of the day. Maria was grievously disappointed not to meet her sister.

“Is Polly so much worse that she could not come, mamma?”

“I don’t think it is exactly that,” said Mrs. Owen. “She is very weak and delicate, you know, Maria; but I suppose she could have come. George Arde has a bad cold, your father says; nearly laid up with it. They have a fresh nurse-girl, too. Polly had to send away the other.”

Yes, Mr. Owen, to his wife, had put the non-coming for the Easter dinner upon any trivial excuse, rather than the true one—Mary Arde’s fading life. And so the cheese-cakes were eaten without her, and the day passed.

The night was bright, quite different from the previous one; it was almost as light as day. When Geoffry Clanwaring and his wife

were departing after supper, Mr. Owen put on his cap to walk part of the way with them.

"I should think that cap of yours will never wear out, papa," saucily observed Maria.

"It does not get fresher," returned Mr. Owen ; "but it is good for a cold night, lass."

This cap had been a standing joke with Robert Owen's daughters. It was of seal-skin, originally bought for travelling ; was expensive and considered very handsome, in accordance with the taste of the day. A year or two ago, when it was growing worn and shabby, Mr. Owen had taken it into night use : one evening, in standing over the candle to read a letter, the front of it had got woefully singed ; burnt, in fact. Mary Barber, who never would see anything wasted that could possibly be used, edged it round with some white fleecy fur. It rendered it more comfortable than before : but certainly not more ornamental ; for it made one think of a magpie.

"Robert, won't you put your great coat on ?" asked Mrs. Owen, as she followed them to the outer door.

"I think I will," he answered, turning back to take it from the peg. "The air is frosty."

She stood a minute at the door watching them along the path that led round to the side of the house, Maria arm-in-arm with her husband ; Mr. Owen buttoning his coat, his favourite stick in his hand. A chill seemed to take her and run right through her frame ; she hastily shut the door and returned to the fire.

“ What be you shivering at, missis ? ” questioned Mary Barber.

“ It is cold at that open door,” answered Mrs. Owen, beginning to stir the fire. “ I have felt a little shivery all the evening. This best parlour is not half as warm as the other.”

It was then ten o’clock. Mary Barber, busy in the kitchen, helping Joan to put things straight there, did not come in again for nearly an hour. Mrs. Owen had dropped into a doze over the fire, and woke up with a start.

“ Dear me ! I was asleep. What’s the time, Mary ? ”

“ Hard upon eleven, missis.”

“ Hard upon eleven ! ” echoed Mrs. Owen. “ Why, where can the master be ? He must have gone all the way with them.”

“ It’s a rare fine night,” responded Mary Barber—as if tacitly implying that the fact might have tempted her master on.

Mrs. Owen put the Bible on the table against her husband should come in. Mary Barber sat down on the other side the fire ; and they waited on, talking of various things. Joan wanted a whole afternoon's holiday on the morrow—and a "whole" afternoon dated in Joan's vocabulary from one o'clock in the day. Mary Barber did not approve of Mrs. Owen's having consented to Joan's taking it ; and said so. The cuckoo clock struck half-past eleven.

"Why, where *can* he be ?" exclaimed Mrs. Owen.

Wondering did not bring an answer. The time went on to twelve. Mrs. Owen was in a state of great surprise then, somewhat of alarm.

"Mary, do you think he can be staying all this while at Maria's ?"

"Not unless him and Mr. Geoffry Clancwaring have got smoking a pipe together, missis. And that's not over likely."

"But, even if they had, the master would not stay all this while."

The house was very still : nothing to be heard but the ticking of the cuckoo clock, that came faintly through the open door of the other parlour. Joan was in bed and

asleep, recruiting herself against the morrow's pleasure ; Parkes, the man who slept in-doors, was also in bed. The clock ticked on for another half-hour : and with every minute Mrs. Owen's uneasiness grew greater.

" Mary, it will soon be one," she said in excitement. " It is not *possible* but that something must have happened to him ! Perhaps he has fallen down somewhere and hurt himself."

" The best thing, missis, for you to do, is to go to bed."

" Go to bed ! Nonsense, Mary. I could not sleep if I did. You must call Parkes ; and let him go out and look for his master."

" It'll take more time and trouble to waken Parkes than to go myself," was Mary Barber's answer. " Once that man gets asleep, there's no rousing him till work-time i' the morning. I'll go, missis."

If a thought crossed Mrs. Owen that she should feel very lonely all alone, she suppressed it. Mary Barber was even then putting on her bonnet and warm cloak. Her mistress flung a shawl over her shoulders, and went with her to the corner of the house where she could see the fold-yard. They both listened for a minute, hoping to hear

footsteps : but not a sound broke the night's stillness.

“Take the open road down Dene Hollow, Mary. That's the way he'd come up : perhaps you may meet him.”

Now it is a positive fact, and one often spoken to by Mary Barber afterwards, that with the relating of the dream to her master in the morning, it had gone out of her memory. What with the preparation of the good cheer (deemed necessary for Easter Sunday and for the visit of Mr. Geoffry Clanwaring and his wife), and with the scuffle, it was, to get out to afternoon service herself, and to let Joan get out ; in short, what with the bustle of the day altogether, Mary Barber's mind had been fully occupied, and she had not once remembered the dream. Never at all. As she passed through the footgate into Harebell Lane, some night bird flew, with a cry, across the trees higher up, its wings making a great rush and whirr.

“That's a owl,” thought Mary Barber, turning her face full towards the sound. “I hate them owls.”

All at once, in that moment, as she stood gazing up the lane, the dream came flashing into her memory. Just as it had been in the

dream, so it was now in reality—Mr. Owen was missing and being looked after. Only, in the dream there had been a good many of them looking, and here it was but herself. So intensely did the fact—nay, the fear—come home to Mary Barber, that her arms dropped by her side as if a weight had pulled them.

With a feeling of certainty, that no persuasion could have shaken,—with a dread terror that seemed to catch her heart and hold it,—with a shivering sensation that perhaps she had never in her life, save once, experienced, the conviction crossed her that it was in that upward direction she ought to search, not the other. And Mary Barber had all but started up the lane at the top of her speed.

But, even with the most superstitious and fanciful, common sense must, and does, in a degree exert its sway. It told Mary Barber that there would be no *reason* in looking for her master in the opposite direction to that he had been bound upon. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, likely to have taken him up Harebell Lane, especially when he had been going the other way. But, had she started as impulse led her, it would have been the very exemplification of her dream—when

she and others had been flying along the lane ; for what particular point she knew not, only that it was in the direction of the Trailing Indian.

"It's very odd," she said to herself with a sigh, as she turned about the other way—and her heart felt like a lump of lead. "How was it I forgot the dream all day long ?—and why should it ha' come rushing over me as I looked up the lane at the cry of that bird ? Was it the sight o' the lane brought it back, I wonder ? But what's odder than all the rest, is the fact that master should be missing as he was in the dream ; and that I should ha' come out after him."

Very quickly she went on now; not exactly with a run, but at a sharp walking trot that was faster. Under the park wall of Beech-hurst Dene went she, turning off opposite its front gates, down the smooth road of Dene Hollow, so cold and white in the frosty moon-light. A few minutes brought her to the bailiff's lodge, Geoffry Clanwaring's humble residence now.

That Mr. Owen was not lingering there, appeared pretty evident ; the house was closely shut up, its upper curtains drawn. By dint of knocking for a few minutes, Mary

Barber succeeded in arousing Geoffry Clanwaring. He opened his chamber window, and looked out.

"Is the master here, sir?" asked Mary, standing back against the shrubs to look up.

"What's it you, Mary Barber?" he exclaimed. "'Your master? No, he is not here. Why did you think he was?'"

"Didn't he come here, sir, with you and Miss Maria?"

"No. He came as far as the new road; and then turned back. He said he was going to look at a sick cow: Lightfoot, I think he called it."

Maria's head appeared beside her husband's shoulder. A thought had struck her.

"Is mamma taken ill, Mary Barber?"

"Not she," replied Mary Barber. "Why should you think that, Miss Maria?" For Mary rarely gave the young lady her new matronly title; the other was more familiar.

"Then why should you have come after papa? What is it that's the matter?"

"There's nothing the matter, except that he has not come home."

"Oh, is that all?" returned Maria, carelessly: and neither she nor her husband appeared to have an idea that it was so late.

Suddenly aroused from sleep, they were naturally confused. "Then why need you have come?" repeated Mrs. Clanwaring.

Mary Barber possessed a large share of prudent reticence. It occurred to her that she need not further alarm this young girl—who was not altogether in strong health—by saying what she feared. "We got a wondering where the master could be stopping, Miss Maria—and your mamma wanted to go to bed," she said. "That's why I come."

"Well, I hope you have liked your walk—and you've given me a fright besides. Good-night, Mary; I wish you a pleasant ramble back again."

"Mr. Owen is sure to have been with Lightfoot," added Geoffry. "You will find him at home when you get back. Good-night."

He closed the window; and Mary Barber turned slowly away, the weight at her heart ten times greater. Had Lightfoot been dead or dying, he would not have stayed with the animal all that while. An awful prevision lay on Mary Barber—that he was dead. He, her master.

It had been calm and still as she went down, but now a breeze had arisen; stirring

gently the branches of the trees, passing through them with a slight moan. The shadows played on the white road up Dene Hollow ; Mary Barber thought of that other shadow that her mother professed to have seen, and shivered a little as she passed the spot. What with the remembrances attaching to the road, and this present midnight dread, things looked to her a little ghastly.

A quick, firm step on the upper path. Mary Barber heard it, and her heart leaped with hope. But it proved not to be her master. It was Mr. Priar. They met at the corner opposite Sir Dene's lodge. The surgeon looked thunderstruck at seeing her.

“ Why, Mary Barber ! What brings you abroad here at this hour ? ”

A brief, mutual explanation ensued. Mr. Priar was on his way from the Trailing Indian, to which inn he had been summoned in desperate haste some few hours before.

“ What on earth for ? ” demanded Mary Barber. “ Who's ill ? ”

He told her who—at least, as well as his knowledge of facts allowed him. That afternoon a comely young woman, footsore and tired with walking, made her unexpected appearance at the inn door, in search of Mr.

Michael Geach, whose wife she announced herself to be. Geach went into a towering passion, abused her for coming after him, and ordered her away again. She refused to go ; and a general quarrel ensued. What with the fatigue, and the excitement of the quarrel upon it, the young woman was taken ill. Her symptoms grew serious ; Mr. Priar was sent for, and arrived in time to usher an infant into the world.

“ Well, I’m sure !” cried Mary Barber, when she had listened to the story. “ Geach ? —Geach ? I’ve heard that name afore now.”

“ He is an acquaintance of Black’s,” said Mr. Priar. “ Some loose fellow, who appears by fits and starts at the Trailing Indian.”

“ Is the young woman his wife ?”

Mr. Priar gave his mouth a twist, clearly distinguishable in the moonlight. “ If required to produce her marriage ‘ lines,’ I fancy she might have some difficulty in doing it,” said he. “ Black turned virtuous over it, I hear : he is annoyed that she should be laid up there. She is very ill, poor thing.”

“ Did you see my master at the Trailing Indian ?” resumed Mary Barber. “ Or in the lane as you came along it ?”

“ No. I should hardly be likely to see him

at the Trailing Indian. As to the lane, it seemed more lonely than ever to-night, as if not a soul had been in it for ages."

He was making a movement to pass on, naturally wanting to get home to rest. Mary Barber put her hand on his arm and detained him.

"James Priar"—she had called him so before in solemn moments : and this seemed to be one of the most solemn she had ever passed—"there's a feeling upon me that some great ill has happened to the master. I think he is dead."

"Dead ! Mr. Owen ?"

With the moon shining right upon her face, Mary Barber disclosed her reason for saying this, and related her dream, regardless of the wondering stare that Mr. Priar fixed upon her. As she went on, speaking very earnestly, the incredulous surprise on his countenance gave place to a kind of concerned perplexity. Perhaps he was somewhat superstitious himself.

"*That's* why I asked you, James Priar, whether you had seen him up there. Because in the dream we seemed to know it was the right place to search for him in—somewhere toward the Trailing Indian."

"I've neither seen sign of him, nor heard news of him," was the answer. "If Geoffry Clanwaring tells you he was going to see the sick cow, no doubt that's where he went to."

"But he'd not stay in the cow's shed all this while."

"You don't know. Possibly, he found the animal worse, and may have gone after Cole the farrier. It's not unlikely, Mary."

This idea had not struck Mary Barber. It was certainly possible.

"Yes, yes!" said the surgeon hastily. "For goodness' sake don't let your mind run on those other dismal thoughts. You'll find him all right when you get home."

She slowly shook her head, in spite of the faint hope that arose within her; and they parted. "I might think it," she said, "but for my morning dream. And them morning dreams come true."

CHAPTER XIII.

AT THE TRAILING INDIAN.

“**I**S he come home?” was Mary Barber’s first question, as she burst into the farm. And Mrs. Owen caught hold of her as if it were pleasant to find herself again in companionship. The past hour had been worse than solitary.

Robert Owen had not come home. There were no tidings of him within, any more than without. Mary Barber mentioned the suggestion offered by Mr. Priar.

“There’s nothing in it, missis, as I believe,” she said. “But I’ll rouse up Parkes, and make him go with me to the shed. If we see nothing o’ the master, we’ll come back and go down the hill to Cole’s.”

After a considerable amount of shaking and thumping, Mr. Parkes, a thick-headed rustic

of twenty, was aroused, and he and Mary Barber started off across the fields. The night was so light that they could distinguish every feature of the way clearly ; almost every blade of the sprouting grass.

“ I see the master to-night a going on to the shed,” suddenly cried Parkes : who had a round crop of red hair, and kept a few steps behind Mary Barber.

She turned her face and her tongue short upon him. “ You see the master going on to the shed ! ” she repeated in a tone of dispute. “ What do you mean by that, Parkes ? ”

“ So I did,” said Parkes. And he proceeded to explain how it had happened. Parkes had spent the afternoon at his mother’s—who lived two or three miles away, on the high road that crossed the upper end of the lane near the Trailing Indian—and came back later than he ought to have come. Jumping over the style opposite the inn, he crossed the first field to the two-acre meadow. There he suddenly saw his master come round the narrow path between the fence and the grove, just above Harebell Pond. Not caring to be seen—for the rule was that he should be at home earlier—Parkes sheltered himself under the hedge, saw the master strike across the

field towards the cow-shed, and then made onwards as fast as his legs would carry him.

"What time was this?" questioned Mary Barber, when she had heard the confession.

"Blest if I can tell a'zactly," replied the young man. "I know 'twere a sight a'fter ten."

Therefore it appeared certain, from this testimony, that Mr. Owen, after parting with Geoffry Clanwaring and Maria, had gone straight on to the cow-shed, through his fields. "But you must have been a fool, not to show yourself and bear him company, as you were there, Parkes," cried Mary Barber, who liked nothing better in life than keeping the youth in order.

They passed round the narrow path, so often mentioned, between the grove and the fence—Mr. Parkes taking a temporary recreation by catching up a clod of earth and dropping it over into Harebell Pond. It was the nearest way into the two-acre meadow, cutting off the width of a wide field.

The shed was there, and the cow was there, all right and comfortable: but Robert Owen was not. No sign, even, was seen to tell that he had been: but of course such sign was not to be expected.

"Let's go and have just a look at the Trailing Indian," cried Mary Barber.

Parkes tramped off after her, over the stile, and across the field to the other stile, opposite the Trailing Indian. All still and quiet lay the house in the moonbeams ; closely shut up ; there was not so much as a light visible to indicate the chamber of the sick woman told of by Mr. Priar.

"We'll take the way o' the lane back," said Mary Barber, "and go on straight to Cole's."

It was just possible her master might have fallen somewhere, she thought ; might be lying still, and so escape the eyes of Mr. Priar, who said the lane was empty. She kept her own wide open, looking well to the banks on either side : and looking fruitlessly. Parkes flung another clod into the pond as he passed it, bestirring its green and slimy waters. It took more time to knock-up the farrier than it had Geoffry Clanwaring. But the man had not seen Mr. Owen.

A more miserable morn than that dawning on Harebell Farm could not well be imagined. Do what she would, bring any confuting argument to bear against the impression, any amount of sober reasoning, Mary Barber was

unable to divest herself of the conviction that some untoward fate had overtaken her master, or of the notion that the Trailing Indian and its inmates had something to do with his disappearance. She started off for the inn as early as she thought it would be astir, her footsteps brushing the dew from the grass. The side door of the house was open; she entered without knocking, and penetrated to the kitchen. The kettle was singing away on the sway over the fire; and Mrs. Black, kneeling down before the earth, was raking the dust from the cinders into the purgatory. A tea-pot and caddy stood on the table.

"Where's my master?" sharply demanded Mary Barber.

Mrs. Black started up as though she had been shot. By the white hue her face changed to, certainly telling of terror, Mary thought the woman must be taking her for an apparition. There was a minute's silence.

"Who did you ask for, please?" then questioned Mrs. Black in her close, meek way.

"I asked for my master: Mr. Owen, of Harebell Farm. That's what I've come for."

"But I don't know anything of him," returned the woman, after a pause, and in

what appeared to be very genuine surprise.
“He is not here.”

“ Didn’t he come here last night—say at half-after ten, or so ;” pursued Mary Barber, hazarding the question.

“ Not that I saw ; not that I know of. I think the house was shut up afore that.”

“ He went to the two-acre meadow about that time, to see a sick cow. We be a thinking that he may ha’ come on here : perhaps for something or other that he wanted.”

The landlady gave her head a shake, as if hardly understanding. “I’ll ask the ostler if you like,” she said. “I wasn’t about here last night myself : we’ve got a sick woman up-stairs.”

“ I feel as sure in my heart that the master come on here as though I’d seen him come, Mrs. Black.”

“ Well, he might, in course,” admitted Mrs. Black, after a pause given to the consideration of the matter. “ I can’t say : but Joe’ll be here in a minute or two.”

Mary Barber sat down without being asked. Mrs. Black finished her cinder job, and pushed the fender into its place.

“ Where’s Black ?” was Mary Barber’s next curt question.

"He's not up yet," replied the landlady.
"As for me, I've not been to bed."

Mary understood the reason—that she had sat up with the sick woman. "I heard on't," she said. "How is the person!"

"Well, she's bad enough."

A short silence ensued. Mary Barber seemed impatient; the landlady stood waiting for the kettle to boil, and took occasional glances at her morning visitor.

"But I don't understand why it is you've come asking about this," she suddenly observed, the point striking her. "Did Mr. Owen get home tipsy last night?"

"*He* get home tipsy!" was the indignant rejoinder. "That was never a failing of his."

"Then why should you think he come to the inn?"

"We don't know what to think. He never come home at all."

Mrs. Black lifted her eyes in much surprise.

"Since the time when he went to that there cowshed last night, he has never been seen nor heard of. My belief is that he has been made away with."

The woman was in the act of putting a spoonful of tea into the tea-pot, as Mary Barber said this. The words seemed to strike

her with a shock. Her hands shook so that she spilled the tea; her face again turned ghastly.

"Why, what do you mean?" escaped from her trembling lips.

"What I say," sturdily replied Mary Barber. "We have been abroad all night looking for the master, and he's not to be found above ground. I fear he has been murdered."

"Mercy upon us!" cried the woman aghast.

It was evident that if the Trailing Indian (according to Mary Barber's theory) knew anything of Robert Owen's disappearance, its mistress did not. Gathering up the bits of tea from the table and putting them into the pot with her trembling fingers, she was in the act of lifting the boiling kettle off the sway, when the ostler appeared, carrying in two buckets of water from the well.

"This good lady's come round to know if Mr. Owen at the farm called in here last night," she meekly said, speaking in a sort of hurry. And the man gazed out at her with some questioning surprise in his eyes—perhaps at her white lips.

"Owen o' the farm don't never come here," he briefly replied.

"I think he must ha' come last night," interposed Mary Barber, rising to address the ostler. "We've not heard nor seen him since ; he never come home."

"He never come here," said the man, stooping to pour the water from one of the buckets into a sort of portable cistern that stood away near a sink. "What time was't?"

"Nigh upon half-after ten. May be quite that."

"And we was shut up afore ten struck."

"That you warn't," retorted Mary Barber. "Dr. Priar never went away till one o'clock i' the morning."

"The house was shut up afore ten ; that I'll swear to," asserted the man. "When Dr. Priar was ready to leave, I unlocked this here yard door and let him out myself."

"I told the good lady I thought so—that we was shut up early," spoke the hostess, who had kept her back turned, doing something at the fire.

"We had no callers o' no sort i' the place last night," resumed the ostler, taking up the other bucket. "As to Owen at Harebell Farm, he warn't in the habit of coming at all. If he'd been here last night, I should ha' seen him."

"Be you sure o' that ?" asked Mary Barber.

"I be. I'll take my oath he was not anigh the place."

Mary Barber paused. "Was Black abroad last night?"

"No," replied the ostler "he never went out at all. He was abed afore we shut up."

Apparently there was nothing to stay for. Mary Barber said good morning and went away, feeling that her errand had been a useless one.

Before the sun was high in the heavens, the news had spread far and wide: Robert Owen of Harebell Farm had mysteriously disappeared. Hurst Leet put itself into a commotion. The mere fact of his disappearance might not have excited a tenth part of the interest, but for the persistent assertion of Mary Barber, that he had been, in some way, "made away with."

The testimony of Parkes, as to having seen his master on the previous night was confirmed, at least in a negative degree, by two individuals. Joan said that when Parkes got in "late and all out o' breath," he told her he had nearly been "dropped upon" by the master in the two-acre meadow. The other was Gander, Sir Dene's butler. Gander, returning home soon after ten from taking a cup

of ale with Cole the farrier, overtook Mr. Owen at the entrance to Harebell Lane, gave him the good night, and saw him turn in to his own gate. Therefore, no doubt whatever could rest on any mind that the farmer had proceeded, as was assumed, direct to the shed, on quitting his daughter and her husband. The question now was, what had become of him afterwards.

Harebell Farm, that day, was like a fair. So many sympathising friends and neighbours were flocking up to it. George Arde, who had come over from Worcester on other matters, found it in this commotion. Geoffry Clanwaring was there ; also old Squire Arde. Mary Barber got these three to herself in the best parlour, and there related her dream. The once keen eyes of Squire Arde, watery now, twinkled with merriment as he listened. To use Mary's words, when commenting on it later, he "stared and grinned in her face."

"Mary, woman, I'd not set myself up for a laughing-stock if I was in your place ; the parish might be taking me for a nat'ral. Dreams, indeed !"

But in spite of the old man's ridicule, Mary Barber never wavered an iota in her asserted belief. Her master was *dead*, she said : she

knew it by her dream. Dead, or else in some sore stress of plight that would prevent his ever coming back again ; she was certain he had seen his home for the last time.

Though not given to be superstitious, her steady assertion and its persistent earnestness made an impression upon the two listeners who may be said to have held the largest interest in the matter, as they were Mr. Owen's sons-in-law : George Arde and Geoffry Clanc-waring. They grew to think that he really might be dead. And then they asked themselves and each other, how—if this were so—his death had been accomplished. By accident, or by assault from without ?

" See here," said Squire Arde, looking up from the chair where he sat—" a'most as many accidents happen on a moonlight night as a dark un. People's eyes get deceived by the shadows. I should have the ponds dragged."

" What ponds, sir ?" asked George.

" Eh ? What ponds ? Why, any pond that lay in his way. There's the one by the fold-yard here, the duck-pond ; and there's the pond in the lane. Have 'em emptied—or dragged."

" Should you think he could have fallen in, sir ?" returned George Arde, in what he would

have made a tone of mocking incredulity but that he was speaking to the Squire.

“I think he might have walked in,” was the answer. “Yes, you young men with your young eyes may stare to hear me say it ; but if you live to Robert Owen’s age, you may find ‘em cheat you. Did ye ever hear o’ one Squire Honeythorn, as lived at Beechhurst Dene ?” he quaintly asked. And they smiled at the question.

“Well, one night, moonlight it was too, Honeythorn, in walking home down Harebell Lane, walked right into the pond. He hadn’t had a single sup o’ drink ; don’t you two go a thinking that ; but he was getting in years and the shadows deceived his sight. I know a lady, too, as walked right into the Worcester-and-Birmingham canal and thought it was part o’ the towing-path. Hardly saved, she was, either ; some boatmen heard her cries as she was sinking. It might ha’ gone hard with Honeythorn, only a man on horseback happened to ride down the lane at the time. And that was me.”

“If Mr. Owen walked into a pond, it must be the duck pond here,” said George Arde. “He did not go into Harebell Lane.”

“How do you know he didn’t go ?” retorted the Squire.

"We don't *know*, sir, any of us ; but we may judge by probabilities."

"I'd recommend you not to speak so positively, young man. 'Probabilities' have let in older folks than you, afore now."

"Well, sir, do you see any likelihood, yourself, of his having gone into the lane?"

"No, I don't," candidly spoke Squire Arde. "I only say he might ha' gone. But there : let Harebell pond be. Try this un."

"I do not fear the ponds," interposed Geoffry Clanwaring, who had been in a deep reverie. "Knowing the ground as Mr. Owen knew it, a bright night besides, it seems next door to an impossibility that any harm of that sort should come to him."

"Master ud no more walk into a pond, whether by daylight or by moonlight, than I should walk into the middle o' that fire!" cried Mary Barber, with a fling of her hand towards the grate. "Squire Arde, it's not *there* we must look for him."

"Where then ?" asked the Squire, noting the significance of the tone.

"I think—I think," she slowly rejoined, as if not quite sure, herself—"that it's up at the Trailing Indian. There has been a deal of ill-feeling on Black's part to the master ever

since we came to this farm : and I say that if harm has been done to him, it's by the people *there*."

That Black had accused Robert Owen of spying upon him, they were all aware. The neighbourhood knew so much as that. Also that Mr. Owen had emphatically denied any intentional spying on his own part. He had not looked out for the ill-doings of the Trailing Indian : only, when they, or a suspicion of them, had come under his notice incidentally, he had not shut his eyes. That was all.

Squire Arde administered a reproof. "Mary Barber, there might ha' been ill-feeling on Randy Black's part to your master ; it's like enough. But you shouldn't go and say the man has murdered him."

"I didn't say it, Squire. I didn't go as far in speech, whatever I might ha' done in thought. Truth is, I don't know what to think," she continued, after a pause, "my brain's all in a muddle o'er it. If no harm has come to the master, where *is* he ? I should like to ask Black whether he's alive or dead. When I was up at the Trailing Indian this morning, I couldn't get to see him."

Every little item connected with the past

night bore its own individual interest. Geoffry Clanwaring mentioned that as he and his wife were walking home, Mr. Owen told them he had seen two suspicious-looking men stealing up Harebell Lane on the Saturday night, no doubt on their way to the Trailing Indian. Geoffry could have added, had George Arde not been present, that Mr. Owen changed the subject to speak of his daughter Mary—saying he did not think she would be long in this world,

“ ‘T would do no harm if some on us went up and had a talk with Black,” said Squire Arde. “ There has been a sight o’ trampers and such-like ill-looking folk about lately. If any of ‘em set upon Farmer Owen last night in the two-acre meadow, sounds of it might ha’ been heard at the Trailing Indian. They’ve got a habit, them tramps, of creeping into sheds to sleep: may be, Owen found some in his. Let’s go.”

Nothing loth were the two young men to accompany him to the inn, and they took their hats at once. In the fold-yard of the farm stood Gander. Geoffry Clanwaring stopped to accost him.

“ You saw Mr. Owen last night, I hear, Gander.”

"Yes, sir ; I overtook him i' the lane yonder, as he was turning in at the gate here."

"What passed ?"

"Nothing to speak of," was Gander's answer. "I said 'Good-night, sir,' to him : 'Good-night, butler,' he answered back again. That was all, Mr. Geoffry."

"You did not hear anything of him afterwards ?" Geoffry stayed to ask.

"No, sir ; nothing."

"Or see any strange men about ?"

"Not a soul, sir."

Black stood in his yard, rubbing up the metal of some harness, when they reached the inn. It may as well be mentioned here what was gathered, partly by the man's own admissions, partly by the corroboration of others, of the doings on the Sunday at the Trailing Indian.

In the course of the morning, while people were in church, the man named Robson took his departure from the inn, he and Geach having lodged there on the Saturday night. Dinner was served at two o'clock : Black and Geach sitting down to it, Mrs. Black waiting on them. The meal was just finished, when a young woman arrived ; a foot-traveller, who

asked for Michael Geach, and announced herself as his wife. Geach, astounded at the sight, met her with abuse and passion ; while Black, who had not before known there was a Mrs. Geach, abused Geach for letting her come : or, rather, for letting it be known, by her or anybody else, that he might be found at the Trailing Indian. Both the men had partaken plentifully of strong ale at dinner ; it tended to inflame their tempers, and they quarrelled with each other. Quarrelling is thirsty work ; it makes the throat dry ; and the men found it so. They quitted the ale for spirits, and soon got into a state of intoxication. The ostler, in describing it, said they were only "half gone ;" that is, they were not totally unable to talk or walk. During this time, Mrs. Geach fell ill, and was unable to depart, as ordered. What with that fresh annoyance, with the quarrel and the drink, Geach's fury reached its climax. He betook himself off in his passion, mounted a public conveyance that happened to be passing along the highway, and left Mrs. Geach to her fate and the hospitality of the Trailing Indian. That was about five o'clock. Black, after swearing a little at things in general, sat down in the settle before the fire in what was

called the parlour, and fell into a heavy sleep. He said that he never awoke from the sleep until Joe, the ostler, was shutting up the inn for the night, just before ten ; and then he went straight up to bed. The ostler said this also ; Mrs. Black said it. Before this, the sick woman grew so ill that Mrs. Black became alarmed, and about eight o'clock dispatched the ostler for Mr. Priar. All agreed in these two important points—that Robert Owen had not been to the inn ; or, so far as they saw, near it : and that none of the inmates of the inn had gone forth from it at all that evening, save the ostler on his errand. He, the ostler, returned to it with Mr. Priar, and did not quit it again. If this statement could be positively verified, it was quite certain that Black could have had nothing to do with the disappearance.

He nodded to the three gentlemen civilly enough when they entered the yard, but kept on rubbing his harness. Frightfully ill, he looked, his complexion a kind of sallow whiteness, the effects probably of the intemperance. It was not often Black yielded to the failing ; when he did, it was sure to pay him off the next day in a racking sick head-ache.

“ Well, Black ?” began Squire Arde, “ we’ve

come up to have a word or two with you. Do you know anything of Mr. Owen?"

Black grew suddenly whiter; with an accession of sickness or of anger. He let the strap fall from his hand, and its buckle clicked against the stable door.

"What *I'd* like to know, sir, is, why I should be asked it. I'm free to put that question, I suppose," he added, his voice shaking with what seemed concentrated passion. "Here's been folks coming up every hour o' the day since morning light, asking me what I've down with Robert Owen. That woman o' their'n was here afore the house doors was undone. Why should I be bothered about Owen, more nor others?"

"For one thing, you are his nearest neighbour, Black," was the Squire's answer. "For another, the last seen or known of Owen was in the two-acre mead over there, within a stone's throw of you."

"There might be two hundred Owens over in that there mead, and me never know it," contended Black.

"Mr. Owen was there—it has been ascertained—at about a quarter past ten last night, or from that to half-past," rather sternly interposed Geoffry Clanwaring. "He

has not been seen since. Do you know anything of him, Black?"

"No, I don't, sir," replied Black, speaking with tolerable civility to his landlord's son. "Long afore that time, I was abed. Fact was, I got a drop too much inside me yesterday afternoon—and my head's fit to split, through it, to-day," he added, as if in apology for his sickly face. "I fell asleep in the parlour and never woke nor stirred till bed-time. Joe disturbed me, shutting-to the shutters, and I went straight up to bed."

"What time was that?"

"What time?" repeated Black. "Joe knows more sure nor I do," he added. "Twasn't ten."

"It wanted ten minutes o' ten," interposed Joe, who was splashing away at the horse-trough close by, cleaning it out. "We don't often shut up till ten have struck; but there warn't no customers i' the house, nor none likely to come, and I thought I'd close. The master swore at me, saying it warn't time; he was cross at bein' woke up."

"And you swore at him again, I suppose," remarked Squire Arde.

"No I didn't," replied the ostler, in his stolid way. "When a man's in his cups,

he's best let alone. He didn't give no opportunity for't, neither ; he stumped right off to bed."

" What strikes me's this, Black," said the Squire—who appeared to have quite forgotten the notion of any suspicion against Black. " There's a sight of ill-doing tramps about ; always is after a hard winter ; if any of 'em had crept into the cow-shed, and Owen found 'em there, he and they might have a row together."

" I've never knowed so many o' them tramps about as now," returned Black, hastily and eagerly. " Two bad uns was at the door on Sunday morning, frightening my missis, and begging for scraps o' bread. They'd got just the look o' cut-throats."

" Ay," nodded the Squire. " Who knows but them same two laid up somewhere about here till night, and set on Robert Owen ? You might have heard the noise over here, Black."

" I warn't likely to hear nothing," answered Black. " I fell asleep the minute after I got into bed : and when I'm in that stupid state my sleep's heavier nor a top."

At this juncture Mr. Priar appeared at the side-door, having come down stairs from pay-

ing a visit to the sick woman. They remained a few minutes longer talking, Black steadily persisting in his denial of having heard or seen anything of Mr. Owen ; and then they all turned to depart, including the doctor.

There's an old and good saying—Let well alone. Black did not allow it to govern him just then. Like many another zealous self-defender, he thought the more words he used, the better his cause might be served.

"I've not had a answer to my question, gentlefolk," he began, arresting them as they were going out. "What I'd like to know is, if there's any cause for *my* being singled out to be badgered about Owen—what's become of him, or what's not."

Upon that, George Arde, who had been silent hitherto, contenting himself with looking and listening, turned to face the man, and told him of the bitter ill-feeling he was known to have cherished towards Mr. Owen. He spoke with open and rather stinging plainness, of the suspected private ways of the Trailing Indian : not particularising their nature (perhaps he could not) but alluding to them in a general manner, as "ill-doings."

It put up Black's temper. He was under no obligation to Mr. George Arde, or to his

relative at his side, the Squire ; and he retorted warmly.

“ Well, and he had had cause to feel bitter again Owen : though he had never molested him—nor thought o’ doing on’t—nor never had done it. He had got his own proper feelings, he hoped, though he was but a inn-keeper, and the farmer ud never let him alone. Didn’t Owen watch him continaly?—warn’t he a spy upon him—didn’t he talk about him at Hurst Leet ? *No!* says the gentlemen afore him. *No?* One on ’em, at least, knew better nor that. Look at them lies about the hearse what stopped to bait at his house that night in the winter. Farmer Owen had set it about that it had come to take away a corpse, and had sent Dr. Priar up to accuse him on’t. If——”

Mr. Priar lifted his arresting hand to command silence. “ Don’t be so fast, Black. Who told you Mr. Owen sent me ?”

“ Why, you did,” retorted Black—while the ostler stopped his splashing in the trough to listen. “ Didn’t you confess that the man stood o’ purpose at that stile, over there, and watched the hearse away ? You know you did, sir.”

“ I did not,” said Mr. Priar. “ I told you,

Black, that the person was not watching purposely, but saw it incidentally in passing ; I impressed this upon you as plainly as tongue can speak. And I most certainly never told you that the person was Mr. Owen."

"I know *that* without you telling me, Dr. Priar. There warn't no need to mention names—oh, dear, no."

"But it was not Mr. Owen."

"Not Mr. Owen ! It's all very well for you to try to make me believe that now, sir," added Black, with a sneer.

"I tell you the truth, Black : it was *not* Mr. Owen. The person who saw you was Jonathan Drew—lying disabled now, poor man. In riding past, he saw the hearse at the open door here, and drew up Dobbin by the stile to watch what came of it."

"I can speak to it's being Drew," interrupted Squire Arde, "for he gave me the history of it the next day from his bed. About the hearse he talked, and all what he had seen brought out o' the yard door here, and shut into it. Don't give your betters the lie to their faces, Randy Black."

Randy Black did not speak. He looked from the curious old man to the doctor, silently

asking whether this were really true. So, at least, Mr. Priar interpreted it.

" You need not doubt, Black," said the surgeon. " It was in galloping away from the sight, down Dene Hollow, that Drew's horse threw him—and I wondered at the time that your own common sense did not show you it could have been no one but Drew, knowing, as you did, that he must have just rode past here. The first thing Drew did when I got him home that night was to tell me what he had seen. He concluded it was your wife that was put into the hearse; so did I. And that's what brought me up on the following morning.

Black's lips parted to speak, and then closed again. In some way or other the narrative was evidently making some great impression on him.

" Drew was mistaken," he burst forth at length. " He never saw it; he couldn't ha' seen what was ne'er there to see. The hearse only stopped to bait; 'twas never opened."

" It is of no consequence now, one way or the other; the thing's past and done with," coolly rejoined Mr. Priar. " Only don't continue to fancy it was Mr. Owen: he saw no more of the matter than I did. As it hap-

pens, I am in a position to testify that Mr. Owen never went out of his house that night. I was up there you remember : and we were all in distress about the little child. Mr. George Arde, here, can bear out what I say : he was at the farm, too."

George Arde nodded in confirmation.

" Ay, ay," wound up the Squire. " Don't you be fond of laying hold o' wrong notions, Black, and then sticking to 'em i' the teeth o' people."

They turned without further speech to quit the yard. Black drew a long breath as he looked after them. " You can finish the harness, Joe," he said to the ostler, and went indoors.

As they crossed the lane and the opposite stile, Mr. Priar spoke to what had come under his own cognisance the previous evening. It was past eight o'clock, he said, when the ostler, Joe, came to fetch him ; they both went back together to the Trailing Indian, reaching it about nine. Black was fast asleep at the corner of the settle : and Joe remarked that his master was " sleeping off some drink." About a quarter before ten Mr. Priar went down stairs for something he wanted : Black was then still asleep in the same place and

position, and Joe was sitting by the kitchen fire. In a minute or two Mr. Priar went up again, and did not see Black again. It was quite possible that the man might have gone up to bed before ten, as he asserted ; Mr. Priar could not say one way or the other, for he was shut up with Mrs. Black in the sick woman's chamber. He did not think the ostler went out again : they had occasion to call two or three times for hot water and other things, and the man was always at hand to bring them up. When Mr. Priar came down to leave, an hour after midnight, the ostler was waiting up in the kitchen to let him out. Mr. Priar took half a glass of hot brandy and water before going out, which Joe mixed. He stood by the kitchen fire and talked to Joe while he drank it : and he remembered that the man incidentally mentioned that his master had gone to bed before ten.

All this tended to corroborate Black's own statement : it certainly did appear that he could not have harmed, or helped to harm, Robert Owen. In passing the shed, they turned into it ; for curiosity's sake, more than in expectation of making any discovery. Lightfoot, recovering fast, was there, and

turned her head to welcome them : but there was no sign that any struggle had taken place in it. In fact, the undisturbed litter spoke to the contrary.

“ Whatever happened, must have happened *after* he had paid his visit here, there’s no doubt of it,” remarked Geoffry Clanwaring, as they went out. “ Parkes saw him making straight for the shed : had he been molested before reaching it, the man could not well fail to have heard the cries. The door was found fastened too, just as Mr. Owen would leave it. Now then—let us see. He would naturally go straight back home again, knowing Mrs. Owen was waiting up. That would be across here”—stretching out his hand to the two-acre meadow, which lay green and smooth before them as they walked—“ round the narrow strip of path, and so across the fields home. It’s a pity the sheep are on the other side the farm this year,” he added : “ had they been here the shepherd might have been about.”

Crossing the stile over to the narrow pathway, they traversed it slowly. It was very narrow : not possible for two to walk on it abreast ; the fence, a low one, lay on their right ; as they walked their left shoulders

brushed the trees. In length it might have been twenty yards ; not more. In the middle of it Squire Arde stopped and looked over at the pond in the lane underneath.

“ Ah,” said he, “ if Owen had been a going through the lane i’stead o’ up here, I should say he had mistook his way amid them rushes, and walked into the pond.”

“ But don’t you think, sir, even had such a thing happened, that he would have been able to get out of it again ?” spoke Mr. Clanwaring.

“ Like enough : some might and others mightn’t,” answered the old man. “ What’s this ?”

He had his back against the fence now, glancing at the brushwood that grew amidst the tree-trunks immediately in front of where he stood. It appeared to be a little torn.

“ One might a’most fancy that somebody has made a dash through it just here. What d’ye think ?”

The three others, glancing to where the old man pointed, did not appear to think much about it. “ Some animal, perhaps,” one of them carelessly answered.

“ I suppose we must give up all suspicion of Black,” remarked Geoffry Clanwaring, as

they went on over the open field. "The account he gives seems fair enough. Likely to be true."

"Ay : I don't doubt him in this, for my part," acquiesced the Squire.

"Neither do I," said Mr. Priar.

"I don't altogether doubt him ; but I don't altogether trust him," dissented George Arde. "Look here : while you were talking to him, I was watching him : taking observations, as may be said. There was one thing I did not like—his enlarging on the state he was in yesterday. It is not considered a great crime to get drunk in these drinking days ; nevertheless, most men in Black's position would rather hide the fact from their betters than gratuitously proclaim it. I wondered whether he had any motive for wishing us fully to believe that he *was* drunk. Another thing : he never while he spoke, looked one of us in the face throughout the whole interview."

Squire Arde, deep in his own thoughts, had not been listening. "Who didn't?" he sharply asked, waking up.

"Who, sir!" returned George Arde, slightly surprised. "I was speaking of Randy Black."

CHAPTER XIV.

HAREBELL POND.

THE singular disappearance of Robert Owen excited more speculation and comment than anything that had occurred in the neighbourhood of late years. The turning out of doors and razing the home of the widow Barber, the stolen marriage of Sir Dene's son, both of note at the time of their occurrence, did not excite the prolonged commotion that this disappearance caused. As the days went on and brought no tidings, the painful interest increased. He was not a man likely to have gone away of his own accord ; and yet he could not be heard of above ground. Mary Barber's opinion, that he had been put under it, spread silently.

The duck-pond near the fold-yard was searched ; it yielded in recompense nothing but mud. In returning home from his visit

to the shed (if he did return), Mr. Owen might pass the brink of this pond. The probability was that he would ; though he could have gone round on the other side the barn. Harebell pond was let alone : it was universally assumed that nothing would be likely to take Mr. Owen into the lane. To have returned home that way, after leaving the shed, he must have traversed the outer field, crossed the stile opposite the Trailing Indian, and thence through the whole of the lane—a regular round for nothing. So Harebell pond was not meddled with.

The feeling against the Trailing Indian died away. Mary Barber avowed *her* doubts of it openly enough, and this at first raised somewhat of doubt in the minds of others : but as there was absolutely nothing to corroborate these doubts—nay, as the Trailing Indian seemed, for that one evening at least, to be beyond the pale of suspicion, the thought of connecting Black with the disappearance faded away, so far as regarded the public. Mary Barber, however, do as she would, could not get rid of her fear so easily ; it clung to her in spite of herself, and perhaps influenced in a degree some of those about her.

Sir Dene Clanwaring, waiving prejudices

for the time being, made a call at Harebell Farm. Never, since his son's marriage with Maria, had he exchanged a word with Robert Owen, or condescended to notice him by so much as a nod in passing. He did not accuse the farmer of having in any way helped on the marriage, or of being privy to it ; but his wounded pride would not brook the slightest approach to intercourse. In his interest now ; his curiosity, and perhaps also in a better feeling—that of compassion for Mrs. Owen—he considered it his duty as landlord to call. Mrs. Owen, however, was keeping her room, too ill to receive him ; but he saw the son, who had been summoned home in the distress. William Owen was the eldest of the family ; a slight, quiet young man of three-and-twenty, very much like his mother. He was with a farmer in Wiltshire, gaining experience, and earning a small salary. Harebell Farm had been no larger than Mr. Owen could himself well manage ; and the son was waiting until his father could spare the funds to take a small farm for him. Sir Dene was a little taken with the young man, whose manners were very gentle and pleasing. Sir Dene questioned Mary Barber what her grounds had been for doubting Black—of

which doubt he had heard from his son Geoffry: and Mary Barber, nothing loth, regaled Sir Dene's ears with her singular dream. Sir Dene did not attempt to dispute the dream, or to cast ridicule upon it: he simply asked, when the relation was over, *what* there was in that dream to cause her to suspect Black. She replied that the only part of the dream which could have had any reference to Black, was the concluding part of it—when they were searching for Mr. Owen in their distress, and were all making, as if by instinct, towards the direction of the Trailing Indian—and that it was *not* the dream which led her mind to doubt Black, but the ill-feeling which the man, as was well-known, had long entertained towards her master. Sir Dene nodded acquiescence to this, and took his leave courteously. Since the finding of the paper given by Squire Honeythorn, he had been very civil to Mary Barber when by chance they met: as if he would tacitly apologise for having doubted her mother's word.

The weather in England is capricious; as we too well know. Before the Easter week was quite out, the lovely spring sunshine had given place to a heavy fall of snow. One day

in the next week, when the ground was white, Sir Dene and his son Geoffry were returning home on foot through Harebell Lane from a visit to some outlying land on the estate, and caught the sound of some young voices in dispute, as they approached the pond. Suddenly a man's tones drowned the others'.

"What's the matter there, I wonder?" carelessly remarked Sir Dene to his son.
"That's Black's voice."

The matter was this. Two little ploughboys, not quite so hard-worked as usual by reason of the snow, had met in Harebell Lane, and went in for a game of snow-balling. It ended in roughness. There was a personal tussle on the edge of the pond, and both fell amid the snow and rushes. Fell on something that hurt the under one. It proved to be a thick, nobbly, walking-stick, polished to the brightness of mahogany. Both lads seized upon it, each claiming it for his own booty. While they were fighting for possession, Randy Black came up the lane, pounced upon the combatants, like the hawk in the fable, and took the stick. As Sir Dene came in sight he was holding it above his head, beyond the reach of the howling and indignant boys, who were vainly jumping up to try and get it

back. Black had his back turned, and did not see that any one was near.

"What stick's that?"

The stern, authoritative interruption was Geoffry Clanwaring's. It arrested the boys' noise, it startled Black. As the man turned sharply to see who spoke it, he flung the stick into the pond—and Geoffry, springing forward, was too late to save it.

"What did you do that for, Black?" demanded Geoffry.

"It's the best place for it, Mr. Clanwaring," was Black's answer, as he made a show of touching his hat to Sir Dene. "These here young devils 'ud a fought to their skins for't else."

"It is *not* the best place for it," returned Geoffry, with some emotion. "Wait an instant, sir, please," he added to his father, who was walking on. "Whence did you get that stick, Black?"

Something seemed to be the matter with Black. He had turned so deadly white.

"What stick was't?" questioned Black of the boys, moving to face them. "These here young hounds had got a fighting over it when I come up."

"'Twere 'mong the rushes," sobbed one.

“ ‘Twere me as it hurted, a falling on’t ;
‘twere me as had it first.”

“ Why do you inquire, Geoffry ?” asked his father. “ Is the stick anything to you ?”

“ Yes, sir. The stick was Mr. Owen’s. It was the one he had with him that night.”

“ Nonsense !” cried Sir Dene in his surprise.
“ Mr. Owen’s !”

“ I am sure of it. As Black held it up, I saw it distinctly, and recognized it. What was your motive for throwing it into the pond ?” he asked, turning on Black.

“ Motive ! I’d got no motive, sir—but to pay out these here two varmints,” was Black’s ready answer. “ Why don’t ye tell about the stick, and where ye got it ?” he savagely added to the two young culprits, boxing one, and kicking the other. “ Not as I should think ‘twas any stick o’ Owen’s. Taint likely.”

“ I tell you it *was*,” said Geoffry, with a touch of his elder brother’s hauteur. “ How dare you dispute my word ?”

“ If you think ‘twas, sir, I’m sure I be sorry to have pitched it in,” said Black, humbly. “ I never thought ‘twas any stick o’ consequence ; and I don’t think it now. As to you two young beasts, I hope you’ll come to be hung, for getting me into this row.”

He touched his hat again and went on towards the Trailing Indian. Geoffry Clancwaring looked after him.

"Father, I do believe that man knows more about the past than he ought. He pitched in that stick in sheer terror—to conceal the stick. So it seemed to me."

"Owen's stick!" cried Sir Dene, unable to realize the fact. "What is to be done, Geoffry?"

"We must have the pond searched, sir. If the stick was really lying amid the rushes on its brink, the probability is that he is lying within it."

Sir Dene recognized the necessity for action; and no time was lost. In the presence of quite half the population of Hurst Leet, who flocked up to see the sight, Harebell pond was searched. The stick was first of all fished up, and then its master.

Just as he had gone out of his home that night; in his great coat, his magpie cap tied on over his ears, apparently untouched, not a fold of his garments, ruffled, so he was found. At first it was supposed that it was a simple case of accidental drowning. But soon the discovery was made that he had been injured—apparently by a blow—in the back of his head. Was that blow accidental?—or wilful?

Squire Arde, making one of the throng, and whose opinion from his age and position had long held sway in the place, thought Robert Owen had fallen into the pond from above.

“When he left the cow-shed that night, he might have halted at the fence to look up and down the lane, have leaned too far over it and overbalanced himself; his head struck again some sharp substance i’ the pond, which stunned him, and so he lay and was drowned. As to the stick, it fell amid the rushes, and was hid. Or else,” added Squire Arde, “some villain struck at him from behind as he was standing above there, stunned him, and hurled him over. ‘Twas one or t’other, *I* think. D’ye mind what I said t’other day, Mr. Geoffry Clanwaring—about the brushwood being disturbed up there?”

The public took up the notion from that hour: Robert Owen, either by accident or assault, fell over the fence into the water, and lay there quietly to drown. There was no proof at all: only supposition. The coroner’s inquest was assembled, and brought in an open verdict: Found dead in Harebell pond.

And that was the ending of Robert Owen

in this world. The ill-fated man was buried in the churchyard at Hurst Leet, a crowd of spectators attending the funeral.

One piece of impudence must be mentioned. On the day following the interment, Randy Black presented himself at Beechhurst Dene, and craved an audience of its master. He had come to ask for the lease of Harebell Farm, and offered (as an inducement) to pay the first year's rent in advance. Sir Dene thought it the coolest piece of impudence he had ever met with ; and very nearly (in wish at any rate) kicked Mr. Randy out of the house. Harebell Farm, he said, was not in the market.

That was true. It had been arranged that William Owen should manage the farm in his late father's place ; and Sir Dene had already accepted him as tenant.

A week or two went slowly on. The inclement snow, the biting winds again gave place, in accordance with their capricious fashion, to genial spring weather and bright sunshine. But, long ere a month had elapsed, a very startling and disagreeable rumour arose in the neighbourhood--it was not quite certain whence, or how. The substance of it was that Robert Owen could not rest in his

grave, but came back again to haunt the earth. It was said that he had been seen more than once hovering about Harebell Lane.

After the rumour had been whispered well about, the first person to see the apparition—or to fancy he saw it—was Sir Dene's butler, Gander. One moonlight night towards the end of April, just about four weeks after that other moonlight time, which had witnessed the disappearance of Robert Owen, Gander went up on an errand to the Trailing Indian, sent hither by his master. Sir Dene happened to be out of tobacco : none, for miles round, was to be had so good as that kept at the Trailing Indian, and even Sir Dene did not disdain to avail himself of that ill-reputed house's goods. “Get a pound of it, Gander,” said he : “and as much more as Black will spare.”

Gander got the tobacco, paid for it, and accepted a glass of ale, hospitably proffered by Black. Like his master he could forget the doubtful reputation of inn and host, when his interest was concerned — and Gander knew what good ale was as well as anybody. “To drink it up at a gulp and bolt, ud be fine manners,” thought the butler. So he sat

down and sipped it, and had a chat with Black.

"How's that there young woman as was ill here?" he asked.

"She's not about yet," answered Black angrily, for the matter had annoyed him from the first. "Got a bad leg, or something."

After sitting about a quarter of an hour, Gander started for home at a quick pace, the paper of tobacco in his hand. "That's a rare good tap up at Black's," he said to himself as he went along the lane. "Wish Sir Dene ud keep as a good a one for us!"

In approaching the pond, he got thinking of him who had, not so long ago been found there; which was but natural; and the association of ideas caused him to glance up at the fence above. And if ever a man felt that he was struck into stone, Gander did then.

For there, leaning over the fence and staring at him—just as he might have leaned the night of his death—was the well-known form of Robert Owen.

"Mercy be good to me!" gasped the butler.

Dropping the paper of tobacco, never stop-

ping to pick it up, Gander sprung off with a yell that might have been heard at the Trailing Indian, and never drew breath or step till he burst into the servants' hall at Beechhurst Dene.

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